

Adjournment Debate

Let us look at some of the matters the Government considered so urgent. One of them was child care legislation. I recall that the House spent some time considering the child care Bill introduced during the last Parliament. I observed it in the reports of the proceedings of this House. The other day the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) shed crocodile tears, saying that the reason that Bill was not passed was because the Senate obstructed it. The Senate had the Bill before it for less than a week before Parliament was dissolved, and yet we were told this was Senate obstruction. Now we are told that, instead of introducing the Bill again and dealing with the issue, we will have to wait for several years because the Government says we cannot afford it. If we cannot afford it now, how could we afford it then? What was going on? Why spend all the time on child care instead of dealing with electoral reform when an election was in the wind and it was something that was crucial and important to deal with, and which could have been passed in a short time, at least in part, with the agreement of all Parties.

• (1805)

The other Bill that was discussed at the time was free trade. The Government made a great show of spending considerable time discussing that Bill in the House. As I recall, it took some rather drastic measures to ensure its passage, knowing from July on that the Bill was going to face a problem in the Senate. Well, it did not get into the Senate long enough to face much of a problem, but it was there for a short time before Parliament was dissolved. The Government knew that that difficulty was going to be faced. It was not as if the Senate had not said in advance that it was going to delay the Bill until an election had been held. In spite of that, the Government insisted on spending weeks of debating time in the Chamber, going through that Bill, knowing what was going to happen to it later instead of dealing with electoral law when an election was coming on.

Four years had elapsed when the Government could have dealt with this Bill, and nothing was done. It sat on the *Order Paper* for more than a year with nothing happening. I submit that it is clearly the responsibility of the Government to move legislation forward, and it should have done so in this case.

Mr. Murray Cardiff (Parliamentary Secretary to Deputy Prime Minister and President of the Privy Council and Minister of Agriculture): Madam Speaker, the Hon. Member has raised a number of issues. He talked about many subjects, however, I am going to keep my comments to the reform of Canada's election laws, because I understood that was the subject to be raised tonight, not all the other issues that the Hon. Member mentioned.

The Government has long recognized the need for reform of Canada's election laws. In fact, one of the most comprehensive packages of reform ever proposed was contained in the White Paper on election law which was tabled by the Government on June 26, 1986.

Over the course of 15 years prior to the tabling of the White Paper, a number of problems had been identified by all participants in the election process, and had formed the subject of several reports of the Chief Electoral Officer.

The great majority of these problems were addressed first in the White Paper and subsequently in Bill C-79 which was introduced by the Government in June, 1987.

As the Chief Electoral Officer indicated in his 1989 report, the amendments contained in Bill C-79 would, in large measure, have brought the Canada Elections Act in line with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In addition, those amendments would have introduced more flexibility into procedures to revise the preliminary lists of electors and would have expanded the rules for proxy voting. If those provisions had been adopted, a substantial number of otherwise disenfranchised electors would have been allowed to vote in the last election.

Unfortunately, these and other important amendments contained in Bill C-79 were not adopted prior to the last election. On many occasions the Government attempted to reach agreement with the Liberal and New Democratic Parties to allow those amendments to proceed. Despite repeated attempts, no such agreement was reached, and Bill C-79 died on the Order Paper.

In order to facilitate the process of developing amendments which can be supported by Members on both sides of the House, including amendments on the important question of election expenses, the Government announced, in the Speech from the Throne, that a commission of inquiry would be established to make recommendations on changes to the electoral laws. The establishment of such a commission was recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer in his 1989 report.