

Canada Elections Act

afternoon, tonight, or indeed any time, and point out chapter and verse showing when Parliament has taken away rights retroactively. Of course we amend the laws, but we do so for the future.

I submit that the hon. member for Fraser Valley East was rather facile, and even facetious, when he said that we were here to pass laws. Of course we are, and that is what we are doing with Bill C-215. Clause 14(3) will affect people after it is proclaimed, but unlike the amendment proposed by the hon. member for Matane it will not take away rights those people have enjoyed for many years. I do not think it was intended that way, but I think there are some very iniquitous principles behind the amendment that could affect the fabric of the land.

The hon. member for Saint-Denis challenged the right hon. member for Prince Albert by saying that if unity would be diluted he would not support this amendment. He would not even support the amendment of the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra which would grant five years in which to effect the change. I point out that this bill, which was passed by the committee—it may not have been unanimous—in clause 14(3) takes care of the equities and balances the history of the past with the reality of the future.

French speaking members of the House who support this amendment should beware, not because the amendment by itself is going to stir up a lot of emotion, or cause an avalanche of backlash—I do not think that is necessarily the case—but because it could be a catalyst for that. The very fact that we have spent all morning and part of the afternoon debating this clause illustrates as clearly as anything that there is a problem involved, even though the hon. member for Saint-Denis says that in his heart he does not believe there is any problem caused by the clause or by the amendments proposed.

I can accept the bill in its present form because it will take care of the situation with respect to new Canadians in the future, from whatever country they come, but the amendment before the committee will retroactively take away a right that has been enjoyed by a certain body of Canadians. In this case it happens to be British subjects. It could have been Ukrainians, it could have been Canadians of Italian origin, it could have been French speaking Canadians. That is the important point we have to consider when we debate this clause.

[Mr. Nowlan.]

I look forward to creating a constitution on some of the principles enunciated by the hon. member for Saint-Denis, forgetting about the past and looking ahead to the future. But there is not a French speaking man, including the Prime Minister and French speaking members on both sides of the House, who wants to forget about the past when you talk about a constitution or about official languages. The Official Languages Act affirms some of the traditions, precedents and law handed down from the past. I suggest that what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

As the hon. member for Oxford said, adoption of the proposed amendment could act as a catalyst. He pointed out that a good many Canadians are starting to wonder what is going on, particularly with reference to this bill. When you start to build a country, in which one group was ignored for a long time, was held back for a long time—a lot of this the fault of that group itself—by strengthening that group through taking from another group which possesses rights given to it by parliament, then you are not proceeding in the right way to build a country. For that reason, I think all hon. members should pay attention to the implications of the amendments proposed. I think that clause 14(3) covers the situation fairly, balances the rights of the past, does not project any preference into the future, and does not retroactively take away rights.

Mr. Prud'homme: May I ask my hon. friend a question?

Mr. Nowlan: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Prud'homme: Mr. Chairman, I am putting a question to the hon. member because he so often referred to the member for Saint-Denis.

I should like to ask him after listening very carefully to the speeches made this morning and this afternoon, whether this does not remind him of what was said during a debate on the new flag, that it would divide our country forever? At that time, I was in the House and I voted for that legislation because I was convinced that it was not a proposal which would divide our country, but would unite it. And there is no one in this House who can say that the new Canadian flag has divided our country, far from it. I have said that if they were convinced that this amendment would divide our country and if I were