

Canada Elections Act

● (1600)

In closing, I suggest that this Bill not be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections. As a former member of the news media, it is a Bill that I certainly could not support.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): Is the Hon. Member for Cumberland-Colchester (Mr. Coates) rising to contribute to the debate?

Mr. Coates: Yes.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): I must inform the Hon. Member that he has already spoken at this stage of the Bill.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I think that we on this side of the House, not being afraid of information, would be prepared to give consent to allow the mover of the Bill to speak again briefly.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): Of course, that could only be done with unanimous consent. Is there unanimous consent?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. Coates: Mr. Speaker, I simply want to make a few comments. It has been some time since the Bill has been debated and I thought it would be appropriate in concluding the debate today to point out a number of facts.

Several Members from the Liberal Party have apparently presumed that all their Members are opposed to the banning of opinion polls at election time. I suggest they make a closer examination of their own leader's views on this particular matter since he has indicated on a number of occasions recently a real concern about the influence that opinion polls have during an election campaign. He has indicated a belief that it might be in the public interest to pursue this matter further in Parliament in order to determine whether it might be appropriate to take this action.

I was disappointed by the fact that the New Democratic Party Member from B.C. did not speak at least to some degree about how much freedom has been lost in that Province where opinion polls are banned. A pleasing fact about the British Columbia election campaign was that most people did not know what the results would be, including Members of this House. The voters in British Columbia were not being fed a lot of numbers by the press daily with respect to people's opinions. I did not hear any complaints from people in British Columbia that their freedom was infringed upon in any way as a result of no opinion polls being published during the election campaign.

Indeed, one of the best illustrations I can give showing the unfairness associated with the numbers game, which is all that public opinion polls are as far as I am concerned, come from the Ottawa *Citizen* of last Saturday and Tuesday of this week. In Saturday's Ottawa *Citizen* there was a section devoted to the seven major candidates in the Progressive Conservative leadership campaign in which they stated their opinions on various issues of concern to Canadians. This was to allow readers to make a judgment on where those candidates stood

and how much emphasis should be given to their particular aspirations to become leader of the Progressive Conservative Party.

On Tuesday, *The Citizen* released a Southam Global public opinion poll produced by Carleton University. If there has ever been a discredited organization associated with determining public opinion, I would think it would be this Carleton University group, who failed so miserably in predicting the results of our annual general meeting in Winnipeg. What I find interesting about public opinion poll experts is that when the results do not correspond with their polls, they can find as many excuses as the number of points by which they missed.

Another example of inaccurate polls occurred in the United States during the presidential election campaign. All of these brilliant public opinion experts told the world, and particularly the voters in the United States, how closely Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan were running during the final days of the election campaign. Suddenly, what was supposed to be a one or one and a half point spread between Carter and Reagan resulted in almost a totally clean sweep of the United States by Ronald Reagan.

I am concerned that public opinion polls do not portray the facts. Currently, these so-called experts who determine public opinion are discovering that the people upon whom they base their results lie and have fun with those experts. They may be white lies, but they are putting them on. The result is that the public is led to believe anything but the reality of the situation. For that reason I believe these polls are an unfair intrusion into the election process. That includes polls concerning our Party, the Liberal Party, the New Democratic Party or even an internal party matter.

Polling experts today feed off of political parties. I am not opposed to polls being conducted by a soap manufacturer, car manufacturer or others in order to determine public opinion about a certain product. I am not even opposed to political parties conducting their own polls during election campaigns if they wish to spend their money to do that privately. However, I strenuously object to so-called public opinion experts interfering in the electoral process and preventing people from examining the issues of the day as put forward by political parties while the newspapers, television and radio programs feed the public numbers that really mean nothing.

The Hon. Member who just spoke suggested that I have attempted to eliminate the publication of opinion polls during election campaigns on seven occasions. He is correct, I have attempted to do that. The only time that this issue was sent before a parliamentary committee, which was some years ago now, there was a majority decision by that parliamentary committee that such action be taken and that the Canada Elections Act be amended to include the banning of the publication of public opinion polls during election campaigns.

I am aware that polls are used to play politics in the House and that right now the public opinion polls favour the Progressive Conservative Party. But that does not make any difference