

*Private Members' Business*

Canada is perceived as having a pretty fair and balanced electoral system with problems here and there, but by and large our system has been the envy of many. We must do everything we can, as parliamentarians, to uphold the integrity of that system. That is why I think the bill introduced by the hon. member is an important one, because it advances the principle of disclosure of public information about the way elections are run and the way they are financed.

The whole thrust of our electoral law for the last 25 years has been to further this cause of disclosure and to set a limit on election expenses. The imposition of the limit has been vital to the success we have had in controlling election expenses in Canada. The limit that is placed on the constituency associations and candidates in the constituency during an election campaign is very important and the amount we spend is significantly less than is spent by candidates in the United States where there is no such limit on expenditure.

The fact that there are so many expenditures that are excluded from the current definition is a cause of concern because those expenses can career out of control. The fear is that the poll will be used as a means of campaigning in future. I think the hon. member, in advancing his bill, perhaps did not stress that aspect of polling very strongly. It is one of which we are keenly aware. Certainly it is clear from the American experience, from what I was able to learn as result of the work with the royal commission, that pollsters take advantage of the fact that they are polling to pass on a partisan message in support of the candidate for whom the poll is being conducted. In other words, the poll may be there to elicit certain information, but it may also be conducted in order to convey support for or information about a particular candidate and thereby assist in the election of the candidate, not merely solicit information.

If that kind of poll is allowed to go on and the cost of the poll is not included as an election expense, then clearly we are putting coach and horses through the election expenses law that we now have in place. The hon. member's bill accordingly seeks to correct that anomaly. I think it is a fair and a proper correction. I hope that we could advance this.

I see no reason to wait for the report of the royal commission. I know the government is very keen to wait for that report, but when the commission was initially set up we were told the report would be forthcoming in September of this year. It will be December next week and we know that the commission report is not coming down this month. It is late. The next election is expected next fall. If the government follows normal constitutional practice and gets out of office at the end of four years, as it should do, then we will have an election next autumn.

There is not time for Parliament to deal with a major change in the electoral law between now and next autumn and have the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada in a position to administer that new law for an election next September, October or November.

I know the hon. member for Halifax West is reluctant to go to the people that soon. He is aware that if he does he will get thrown out. That is too bad but that is the price you pay for running a bad administration. The hon. member should be enthusiastic about going to the people and giving them an opportunity to express their views on his government's record, the government that he supported. If he thinks the record is so good, then I know he will be confident in going to the people because he knows he will win.

If he recognizes, as we do, that it has been very bad, he will be reluctant. I can see the reluctance is there. I suspect he knows the truth. Perhaps that will keep him quiet for a few minutes.

It is important that we look at the question of dealing with this legislation immediately. In my view, there is a lot of legislation, a lot of bills on the Order Paper dealing with elections, including my own. The hon. member referred to a substantial item which, unfortunately, I cannot get drawn. I notice there was another draw today and I have missed again. If I could win a draw on a bill, I assure the hon. member I would bring this forward in a serious way to try to deal with this issue. I am afraid that by the time the report of the royal commission gets here, and by the time the government decides what it is going to do with the report, it will be too late for us to put in place the changes in the electoral law that we ought to have in place in order to run the next campaign.