

*Private Members' Business*

virtue of the fact that the member believes that his or her electors will undoubtedly uphold the decision of changing party affiliation.

The essential issue is that in modern Canadian politics the choice of who to vote for is one which Canadians make on the basis of a variety of considerations. When they enter the polling station and put a mark on the ballot, they bring into play a number of considerations, certainly the issues that have been debated both nationally and locally in the context of the campaign.

Of course, they consider the individual candidates who present themselves in that constituency for election. They may consider a variety of other factors that come into play. But a very important one for each elector in Canada is the party affiliation that the candidates on the ballot bring with them.

The political scientists have told us and sometimes as individual members of Parliament we do not like to hear this, that in fact, as individuals we may sway as little as 10 per cent of the vote in any given election campaign. Some have said less, some have said a little bit more.

I know we all like to think we have been elected on our own merits. But it seems that most Canadians probably consider very heavily the issue of party affiliation and perhaps the leader of a party in coming to decide who to vote for.

The proposition I am putting to the House in this bill is very simply this. If an individual member of Parliament decides on his or her own account for whatever reason, be it conscience, disagreement with the leader, disagreement on a point of principle, that that member of Parliament must change party affiliation, renounce the affiliation under which he or she was elected, then that decision should be approved or disapproved by the electors of the district from which that member has come.

It should not be left entirely open-ended. As we know under the Elections Act, there can be a very long delay between the time of a vacancy in the House of Commons and the calling of a by-election. I have therefore suggested in this bill that in these circumstances, and I happen to believe in others as well, the by-election should be held within 90 days of the vacancy.

That deals with a couple of things. First of all, it relieves some of the uncertainty that would otherwise be upon a member making this very important personal decision to change party affiliation. There is at least an understanding that within a finite period of time, a reasonably short period of time given the difficulties of holding by-elections, that that vote will be held. The member will either be returned with his or her new or perhaps no party affiliation or at least a verdict will be delivered.

Second, it imposes on the party leadership an obligation to consider very carefully the views of a member of Parliament who has come to this very important decision in that member's political career, namely of changing party affiliation.

Surely if that member can be returned with no or with a different political affiliation, that in itself is an embarrassment to the party leadership. It suggests that before letting a member leave, to go out on an adventure such as this, the party leadership should make every effort to take into account the point of view of that individual and also take into account the views of the constituents that person was sent here to represent.

In the final analysis, we are here fulfilling a number of very important functions as members of Parliament.

• (1710)

I am not one who believes that we are simply here as delegates, sent by our electors to vote without regard to our own point of view, opinion or conscience. On the contrary, I believe that when we act in the House of Commons, in committees, in our caucuses, we must bring to bear not only our own points of view but also our understanding and judgment based upon the work that we invest in understanding important public policy issues, as well as the views of our electors.

I believe that our first obligation as members of Parliament is to try to influence our own party caucuses on policy issues.

That being said, there may well come a point in time where our conscience dictates that we disagree in a very fundamental way. Frankly, there has been much written—and this is not the point of this bill—that we in Canada have gone too far in promoting a view of party discipline which is extremely rigid. That is another issue and I think that there can be many reforms brought about along those lines that will create fewer situations