

Citizenship

to our shores today do not share a common background as they did two generations ago. Therefore, I suggest it is not fair to them to expect them to decide after three years that at that point they must make a choice to adopt Canada as their homeland. Again it can be argued that it is not mandatory that they do so, but nevertheless once the suggestion is made we open the door to them to take that step.

● (2040)

If there is one universal feeling across this country—I think all of us on the immigration committee touring Canada were apprised of this—it is the desire to establish and maintain a sense of worth in Canadian citizenship. People want our citizenship to mean something. The implication is always there that if citizenship is made too easy to obtain its value is depreciated.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, there is one other aspect of the bill that it is discouraging—for lack of a better word—to contemplate. If lowering the waiting period from five years to three tends to depreciate the value of citizenship, then even more so if people are allowed to count 50 per cent of their illegal residence in Canada toward their citizenship. Can you believe, Mr. Speaker, that if the present bill passes a person could be in Canada illegally for six years and he will qualify for citizenship? Do we want to reward violation of the law in this way? Is this the way we enhance the value of Canadian citizenship?

I suggest that as presently drafted the bill has far too many areas requiring consideration before it can receive our acceptance and be presented to the Canadian people. I recommend that we examine the bill thoroughly, and that in committee we make the kind of amendments that will make the bill fair to immigrants, and certainly fair to the Canadian people.

Mr. William Knowles (Norfolk-Haldimand): Mr. Speaker, before I commence my remarks perhaps I should comment on Your Honour's fine appearance in the Chair tonight.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Norfolk-Haldimand): It is a privilege to take part tonight in this debate on Bill C-20, an act respecting Canadian citizenship. It has been said many times before in this debate that it is high time certain changes were made in Canada's citizenship law. These changes are long overdue. I think the last time any meaningful changes were made was in 1947. The bill before the House, I am sure members on all sides will agree, contains some provisions that cannot be disputed, which are much needed, and which we certainly support.

I want to talk about four points tonight. The first concerns equal rights for women. The second has to do with lowering the age of eligibility to 18 years. Then I want to say something about persons born outside Canada of Canadian parents. Lastly, and perhaps more important from our point of view, I want to discuss lowering the residence time in Canada from five years to three to qualify for making application for Canadian citizenship.

Before making these points I should like to review the citizenship court procedure, as I have witnessed it many times in the area I come from and which I have the honour

to represent here. I want to talk about the citizenship courts in the judicial district of Norfolk, presided over by His Honour Judge Pringle, and in the judicial district of Haldimand, presided over by Judge Leach. Both of these gentlemen perform a meaningful ceremony in their respective citizenship courts. The proceedings are conducted with dignity, and the national anthem is played by a school band which is actually brought into the courtroom. There is a colour parade by the Royal Canadian Legion or local police, so that the Canadian flag is prominently displayed before our new citizens. Heads of the various ethnic groups in the community are invited to be present and to welcome new citizens after they receive their certificates. The Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire takes this opportunity to instil a note of patriotism into the business of citizenship.

In addition, police officials and publicly appointed officials such as the mayor of the municipality, members of service clubs, and last but not hopefully not least, members of parliament and members of the provincial legislature are present. I always make a point of attending these courts because of the fact that the judge tries, in the way I have described, to make the ceremony a meaningful one to the new citizens. It is not a sausage machine where citizens are turned out en masse; they know they have participated in a ceremony that is of great benefit to them and which will have meaning for them for the rest of their lives.

One matter that has disturbed me a bit in the past and which I notice will now be changed is that a judge presently asks new citizens to take an oath of renunciation, renouncing their former homeland. I always thought that this was a little difficult for a person who had already torn himself away from his homeland and come to a new country. In future a judge will not ask citizens to take such an oath; they will simply be asked to take the oath of allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen, and to obey the laws of Canada, their new country.

Now I wish to say a word or two about each of the four points I want to make. With respect to equal rights for women, it is very fitting and timely that this amendment be made this year, International Women's Year. Already this year the government has taken steps to amend certain other acts so as to give equal rights to women. I have in mind the Canada Pension Plan where the survivor is now referred to as the spouse, be he or she man or woman. The veterans' legislation was also amended so that a woman serving in one of the women's arms of the armed forces can participate equally with men. No one can fault the minister on this score and I am sure we applaud him for taking this step.

With regard to lowering the age of eligibility to 18 years, this too is a step in keeping with the times. In Ontario today the age of majority is 18 years, which means a person of that age can own property, has the right to sue—and can be sued, I guess—and is generally responsible for his actions. Eighteen is also the voting age now across Canada. I might also mention, perhaps with not too much pride, that for good or bad it is also the legal drinking age. Thus it is certainly logical that the age of application for citizenship should also be reduced to 18 years.