

Election Expenses Bill

Mr. Speaker, as many of my colleagues, after having studied a number of times the election systems of various countries, I believe that our election legislation is excellent—probably the best—and well-fitted to the special needs of our great country.

Some people have already mentioned the advisability of establishing a permanent list of voters—in fact, the first spokesman for the official opposition and the speaker before me suggested it—as a desirable measure to shorten the duration of election campaigns.

I am opposed to this suggestion and the committee which considered the report tabled by the representation commissioner in this House in April 1968 was unanimously against the establishment of such a list, which would be not only costly—I think the figure amounted to \$1 a year per voter—but would be far from efficient in a political system such as ours because elections are not held at a fixed date and the people would probably not welcome compulsory registration or compulsory vote. So, I refer my colleagues to the report of the committee and to the very eloquent report tabled in the House by the representation commissioner, who has examined these various systems.

The question of limiting the duration of election campaigns has been the subject of suggestions this afternoon by the previous speaker and also the subject of discussions both in the Committee on Privileges and Elections and in the Committee on Elections Expenses and we all agreed that the present period is necessary to allow parties and the Chief Electoral Officer to prepare and get organized. However, I believe, together with committee members, that the period during which political propaganda by parties and candidates on radio or television and in newspapers is allowed should be limited to the last month or so before election day.

• (1640)

This would effectively reduce election expenses but I think that despite the improvement in communications to which the hon. member for Prince Edward-Hastings (Mr. Hees) referred earlier, the prescribed period is necessary to arrange elections in a country as large as ours.

Mr. Speaker, the so-called Barbeau Committee had made seven basic recommendations aimed at establishing a more equitable electoral system. I must say that these recommendations are adequately taken into account in the bill now before us. In line with the proposal of our committee, the bill does not however retain the sixth recommendation of the Barbeau Committee suggesting that a registry be established by means of another legislation to audit the various financial returns. It simply amends the Canada Elections Act to enable the chief electoral officer to receive the returns of official agents, and I think that the government has rightly upheld this decision of the special committee on election expenses which made it the subject of one of its recommendations.

The first recommendation of the Barbeau report dealt with the recognition of political parties that would become responsible for their actions respecting the collection and expenditure of election funds through an official agent.

[Mr. Forest.]

The 1970 Canada Elections Act already provides that political parties shall register with the chief electoral officer, under certain conditions. This legislation goes even farther by requiring the registration of agents who alone shall be authorized to receive contributions and who shall be assisted by an auditor for each party. This auditor shall report to the chief agent who, in turn, shall report, within the prescribed period, to the chief electoral officer. The reports shall indicate the parties' sources of income, detailing the categories of contributors, and shall be published. The importance and existence of parties being thus recognized, they shall become legally responsible for their actions.

Candidates must also appoint an auditor to assist their agents to produce the required report on election expenses and sources of income. This is an innovation and fortunately the government will contribute to paying the salary of this auditor.

I agree with the committee chairman and approve the recommendations of the special committee to the effect that it would not be fitting to reveal the names of donors, and this for the same reasons mentioned earlier by the hon. member for Peel-South (Mr. Chappell) which moreover are reproduced after recommendation 44 of the report of the Special Committee on Election Expenses.

The bill thus meets the first and fifth recommendations of the Barbeau Committee to a great extent. The bill, as also the Barbeau committee conclusions, provides no ceiling for total expenses of parties and candidates which henceforth will be known, notwithstanding the suggestion of the special committee. I for one feel that this is a mistake and that a limit should be set, even if it should exceed if necessary, the one suggested, subject to revision after the first general election for which the present bill will have been in force.

The bill retains the limits proposed by the special committee, but only where advertising expenses are concerned. It is a fact that nowadays the latter make up the better part of election expenses, and that this trend can only become more accentuated. For instance, Mr. Speaker, figures submitted to the committee with regard to the election of April 29, 1970, in the province of Quebec showed that 71.37 per cent of the election expenses of the five running parties had gone on advertising. A candidate will be able to claim back 25 per cent of eligible expenses, which is appreciable. I rather advocate the formula adopted by the special committee, which gives the candidate far more flexibility and freedom of action in the thrust of his advertising.

I am very happy, however, that this bill incorporates the recommendations of the two committees which I have mentioned concerning the mailing to voters, a few days before the election, of a special notice informing them of the names and political affiliations of candidates, of the addresses of polling stations, and of polling times, and that from now on candidates will not be allowed to distribute cards in their constituencies, as had become common practice. This will save candidates time and money, and voters will still be very well informed.

I would like to deal very briefly with two major proposals endorsed by the Barbeau Commission and the special committee—tax deductions granted to contributors in