

Election Expenses Bill

cal parties. The piecemeal electoral reforms between 1871 and 1920 all suffered from the twin difficulties of failure to recognize the existence in the law of political parties and failure to recognize that political parties and candidates require fairly large amounts of money in order to carry on their activities.

In the modern world very large amounts of money are required to conduct election campaigns and to communicate effectively with the electorate. Hopefully, this bill will overcome the problems imposed by these earlier failures and as well will bring the question of political finances to the attention of the public. Hopefully, also, it will place candidates seeking public office on a more equal footing.

I am sure hon. members will be asking why we are bringing this bill before the House at this particular time. There is no sinister motive at all behind the timing. Members will recall that the report of the special committee was presented last June, and as the person principally responsible for the scheduling of government business I can say that had I had the bill in my pocket on that date it would have been quite impossible, because of other legislative priorities, to have brought it before the House much earlier since it would have meant removing from the legislative program items to which the government attached priority.

• (2020)

Last fall, as hon. members will recall, we spent much time on the employment support bill, on the tax reform bill and on the farm products marketing bill, just to mention the three main items along with budget bills that had to receive the attention of the House. Also as hon. members know, in this session we have been occupied with legislation of considerable importance. That is why I invite members not to speculate that there is some sinister motive which has induced the government to bring the bill forward at this particular time, unless it is to support the speculation which exists in all our minds that elections are necessary and probably will overtake us at one time or another.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Now tell us about your good motives.

Mr. MacEachen: There is a question as to when the bill will come into effect and whether it will be in effect before the next election. Not knowing when the House will pass the bill and not knowing the date of the next election, it is quite impossible for me to answer that question, except that it is clear that the Chief Electoral Officer can insist under the law on a time period of six months before he is obliged to implement an amendment to the Canada Elections Act. But there is nothing in the law that would prevent the Chief Electoral Officer implementing any amendment or being in a position to implement any amendment to the Canada Elections Act within a shorter period. Of course, hon. members may have conferred individually with the Chief Electoral Officer as to when in his opinion it would be possible to give effect to the provisions of this bill when and if it comes into effect.

The first principle in this bill is a decision to put a limit on election expenses. We all hope and strive for the objective that money and financial resources in the hands of

any individual or any party should not be the deciding factor in elections. There is a widespread opinion, incapable of proof however, that money has been very instrumental in waging and winning elections. Any discussion on the eligibility of persons for office must be premised on the assertion that a candidate with limited funds should have some equality or some semblance of equality of opportunity to present his views as much as the candidate with large resources. This bill in all its aspects will not assert full equality, because how is that possible in any field of endeavour? But at least it will bring us closer to the objective of equality among candidates competing for public office.

One method of putting candidates of differing financial means on a more equal footing in election campaigns, suggested by both the Barbeau committee and the special committee, was the imposition of a ceiling on the amounts which candidates could spend on election expenses. That is quite important because if an effective ceiling is placed on election expenses then a particularly wealthy candidate cannot rely upon great resources in order to influence unduly the outcome of an election. We have not put a cap, we have not put a limit or we have not recommended a limit on all election expenses. We have avoided that, as the Barbeau committee avoided it and as the special committee avoided it, because first of all there is a question of necessity. Is it necessary to put a limit on every conceivable item in the expense list of a political candidate?

There are certain overhead expenses within a campaign which exist from one election to another, which do not vary a great deal and which exist in every constituency—for example, the travelling expenses and personal expenses of candidates. What the Barbeau committee did and what the special committee did was to select those items in the over-all expense spectrum which first of all were foreseeable, were controllable, were subject to the greatest escalation and which were putting the greatest burden upon candidates and political parties.

For that reason, election expenses are defined in the bill generally to include expenditures in connection with the media, the print media and the electronics media; in other words, paid advertising, the biggest element in modern election campaigns. Accordingly, we have imposed a ceiling on a candidate's election expenses to be defined as the cost of paid broadcast advertising, paid press advertising and other forms of paid advertising. A candidate's fixed costs which I have mentioned already, such as travelling expenses, the costs of his nominating meetings, and so on, are not included. The rental of halls, for example, is not included within the definition of election expenses. These are not included because they are relatively static in nature and they have not been inordinate consumers of election campaign funds. Therefore we have defined election expenses to include these special items and we are proposing a limit on campaign expenses under the definition I have mentioned.

The limit on a candidate's campaign spending proposed is \$1 per elector for the first 15,000 electors, plus 50 cents per elector for every elector over 15,000 and under 25,000, and 25 cents per elector for each elector over 25,000. This formula works out at the figure of \$20,000 for the first 25,000 electors, plus 25 cents for each elector over 25,000.