

*Government Orders*

To show how diligently the government pursued this matter, after the commission, which started its work on November 15, 1989, had tabled its report in February 1992 the government immediately established a special committee on electoral reform, which included members of all three main political parties in this House. Committee members worked with tremendous dedication and their patience, in some cases, was exemplary.

Hon. members will also recall that the committee's proceedings were somewhat disrupted by the tabling of the referendum bill. Most members switched committees to be able to examine that legislation. And subsequently, we had our Canada-wide referendum. Finally, after lengthy discussion, the special committee was able to table a report in the House of Commons in December 1992, while the bill on electoral reform was tabled, if I am not mistaken, on February 22, 1993.

So it cannot be said that the government has dragged its feet on this legislation, considering that the last major electoral reform took place in 1974. We therefore felt, and I think rightly so—a position that is shared by the other parties represented on this committee—that we had to do something to make the Canada Elections Act even more efficient and more accessible for all Canadians who wish to exercise their right to vote at least once every four or five years, depending on the dispositions of the government in power.

I think it is important to point out that this bill introduces many improvements. Some people will say the government did not go far enough. Others may complain about the government's approach to the issues. They would have preferred to see this, that and the other. Finally, I think what is important about Bill C-114 is that the government is meeting a commitment it made and that the bill improves the electoral process for the benefit of Canadians whom this process is intended to serve.

We must also remember that the bill is largely based on the first report of the special committee, which intends to produce more reports on electoral reform. To us this is extremely important, and of course I say this as a member of the committee. As I mentioned earlier, the Lortie commission spent almost two years—my hon. friend said it cost about \$20 million—conducting hearings across the country and listening to people expound on the positive and negative aspects of the present legislation, to consider the amendments that would be

necessary to deal with party financing, broadcasting, public opinion polls and candidates, to name a few.

• (2045)

Had we decided to put everything in one single bill—the fact of the matter is we would still be working as a committee on a proposal to table before this House—chances are that the bill before us today could unfortunately not be read the first time, let alone adopted. I think it was extremely wise to divide up our huge task in three stages—phases one, two and three, as we did to provide some very important answers, at least for the short term.

As a second stage, the special committee intends to deal with broadcasting, financing and enforcement issues as I said earlier. In phase three, as mentioned in the report tabled before this House, we will deal with and tackle such issues as the assignment of seats to provinces, drawing constituency boundaries and establishing native constituencies. As far as the drawing of constituency boundaries is concerned, we know that some ridings cover a very small area but are very densely populated, while others cover huge areas, but are very sparsely populated. It is a real nightmare for our officials in Elections Canada and it requires nearly exemplary dedication on their part. When you see how well and how fast—in the case of the last referendum for instance—they completed the enumeration, I think we cannot ask much more from these people. They are already doing their very best and they are doing so not out of self-interest but in the interest of all Canadians, to enable them to exercise their right to vote.

It is easy to register when you live in downtown Quebec City or Montreal, but it is not so easy for those who live in remote areas, when the office of the Chief Electoral Officer is 50, 60 or 100 kilometres away. We have to take that into account and make sure that the proposed legislation as well as the proposed amendments will take into account such factors as distance, remoteness, population density and all those things that could be improved to facilitate the conduct of the vote.

I also wish to thank the committee members for their first comprehensive report which, I assume in good faith, is supported by all of them. It certainly is a good example, as my colleague from Saint-Denis, whose comments are always judicious, said of the parties' ability to work together in reaching a common goal, that is a more accessible and equitable electoral system. The committee's first report is the result of a lot of work in a