

Government Orders

Bill C-81 was made even more unacceptable when the government deleted the clause, in fact its own clause, that would have made this bill invalid after three years. That legislation has now become permanent.

The government displayed absolutely no openmindedness. It is true, as the leader in the House mentioned, that some amendments were made, but they were not fundamental ones. The government rejected any form of non-partisan co-operation. Unfortunately, the result is that we now have an unacceptable bill. Because of this bill, the referendum campaign could be non-democratic.

What will be the value of the referendum if the campaign is dominated and manipulated by the rich and the powerful?

[*English*]

Yes, many Canadians want a referendum, but they want one in which their votes count for something and their voices will truly be heard.

A referendum bill to be fair should ensure four things: first, that every Canadian has a chance to take an equal part in the campaign; second, that the process be non-partisan where governments act as facilitators of the process and not as partisans putting forward their own agenda; third, that the question on the ballot be fair and understandable; and fourth, that there be some agreed upon means to interpret the results.

I have to say with regret that this bill fails on each count. It fails the test of fairness at every step, and it gives me no pleasure to say that. We wanted to see changes. We put forward reasonable amendments. We believed the government when it said it was open to real change because we wanted to support this bill.

• (1120)

I want to talk briefly about where we feel this bill fails the test of fairness. First there is the question of spending limits. One of the hallmarks of Canadian democracy is that elections are accessible not just to those who have the money.

Today in the United States it costs a person who wants to run for senator an average of \$3.7 million. Certainly that leaves out the majority of Canadians who would ever want to participate in an election, if we do not continue to have reasonable spending limits that mean we have a democratic system.

There is no doubt there are precedents in this legislation—they are not legally binding, I understand that—which could lead to that road and that Americanization of our system where we do not have those spending limits.

The government said that we could not put in spending limits, that it was against the charter of rights. Then it brought in spending limits of \$8 million per committee with a limitless number of committees. Is there really anybody in this House who does not believe that an \$8 million limit is really no limit at all?

We have asked repeatedly. If the government had been prepared to do it, I would have been prepared to recommend that we vote for this bill. If the government had said that this was an important issue and it would make a reference to the Supreme Court about whether we could have reasonable spending limits, it seems to me that would have been a reasonable gesture. It would have put to rest this question, because there were differing legal opinions about whether or not there can be spending limits.

We cannot accept that a referendum in which money can be the determining factor is a fair and just referendum for Canadians. Referendums to be fair have to be accessible to all Canadians and there have to be spending limits. At the time of an \$8 million study of our electoral system and the Electoral Reform Commission proposing significant changes which would allow fairer spending rules for elections, it is strange this government is setting a dangerous precedent in going in the other direction.

As I said earlier, let there be no mistake: This is clearly a move to an American style system, a system where now in the United States less than 50 per cent of the people vote. Why is that so? Almost all incumbents get re-elected. Few are challenged. It really is a system where people are influenced by lobby groups and by money. That is not the way we want to see the democratic system in Canada. Any long-term consequences this legislation would entrench are simply unacceptable.

It is interesting. A recent survey of American literature, just to illustrate this point, showed that winners in a referendum campaign spent eight times more than those who lost in a referendum campaign. It seems to me that says it all in terms of the importance of making sure we can have legislation that is fair.