

*Privileges and Elections*

But I quite agree with the position taken by the previous speaker that it is hardly in keeping with the important role of committees for the government to announce it is recommending any course of this sort. It is hardly appropriate for the government to tell the country, as has been done, that the decision has already been made. I am glad to know the government has a position. I think it would have been more appropriate for that position either to have been brought out in a government bill amending the Canada Elections Act or to have been put forward by those who speak for the government on the committee.

● (4:40 p.m.)

It is also a fact that we very strongly support the idea of legislation to permit absentee voting. Again, I wish to thank the President of the Privy Council for the favourable response he made to a question of mine during the late show a week or so ago when I raised this matter particularly on behalf of disabled persons. I think that is a better way to do it. The matter has been raised in Parliament, suggestions have been made about it and the minister has said he favours the idea. But it has been left to the committee to decide whether or not there will be such a move. I hope there will be, and that it will provide not only for disabled persons on whose behalf I spoke some nights ago but also on behalf of other people who because of absenteeism in other parts of Canada or outside Canada are unable at the present time to cast their votes in federal elections.

As I say, on these two matters which apparently will come before the committee we feel very strongly. We support the proposed motion in both cases but we think it is terribly important that the operations of the committee not be interfered with by means of directives from on high. As the hon. member has said, how Parliament operates in respect of its freedom from control by the executive is very important. We feel there are a number of instances in which this has not been recognized by the present government.

The third thing I wish to say has to do with the timing of this whole matter. I do not blame my friend from Hillsborough for having something to say about how slow the government has been acting up until this point. This is in contrast with its desire now suddenly to move fast. This happens so often. The government drags its feet and then a point comes when it wants something done and we are expected to speed up. In this

particular case it is seven, eight or nine months since the President of the Privy Council made a statement to the House on the whole question of amending the Canada Elections Act.

The President of the Privy Council set out a time-table and pointed out that unless we move fast we will find ourselves up against the next election without being ready for it in terms of these legislative changes. Yet, although that plea was made many months ago, precious little has been done up until this point. I think it is in order to criticize the government for this delay. I do not think, however, this gives us the right to add to the delay. I believe we should do all we can to have this motion approved, to have it referred to the committee, and to assist the committee in getting this job done. Indeed, it must report back to parliament as soon as possible so that we can get on with one other matter in particular, to which I shall refer in a moment.

I realize that when one sets out to amend the Canada Elections Act one becomes involved in much detail. If one wants to spend time on the details, then time ad infinitum can be expended. I think it can also be said that in the main the routine technical improvements which need to be made have been drafted by previous committees and by the Chief Electoral Officer. I believe that with some sense of urgency this can be handled rather quickly. So far, there would seem to be only the two issues of policy facing us now, namely the voting age and the absentee ballot. There should be plenty of time to dispose of these issues and cope with them in a satisfactory way. For example, with regard to absentee voting there is the question of whether it is to be done by an absentee ballot, a vote by proxy, or what have you.

I believe that if the members of the committee are seized of the importance of getting this job done with reasonable expedition, and if they have the excellent guidance of the chairman I have nominated, there is no reason this job could not be done before the House rises for the Christmas recess. I urge as strongly as I can that a timetable of this kind be adopted. I do so because I think this question of what we do about election expenses is more important than any of the things we have talked about thus far today with regard to the elections Act. It is important how old people are when they vote. The details of how they mark their ballots and who places the ballot in the box are also important. All