

Canada Elections Act

● (1630)

I think, Mr. Speaker, that at election time, we hear a lot of true and false statements. I share the opinion of my colleague for Roberval (Mr. Gauthier) who said that all kinds of information are often heard during election campaigns. But I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that the information or comments we hear are far more harmful than the few results that may be published following polls.

For example, a candidate during the last election campaign stated that the government favoured Quebec because \$1 bills showed Parliament Hill as seen from Hull instead of Ottawa. Well, Mr. Speaker, I think candidates who go about telling such lies have a far worse influence on public opinion than any radio station, country paper or minor newspaper which decide to conduct their own polls.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, we have to face the fact that, under present circumstances, many voters do not follow as closely as might be expected the political events. Not every voter waits for the results of polls before deciding for which candidate or party they will vote.

By the way, Mr. Speaker, to come back to one of the studies on the matter, the one by professor George Gaskell from the London School of Economics, an institution that my colleagues of the Social Credit Party of Canada know quite well, Professor Gaskell mentioned that even within the studies that are now being made, the results of a poll are quite different if its findings show that there is a very wide difference between the leading party and the runner up, whether the two parties are following one another very closely or the voters are completely indifferent or undecided concerning the issue of the election.

Mr. Speaker, at this stage of the studies on this question, I would really feel unprepared to accept the bill as proposed. If it were suggested that we legislate on polls or allow a definite period of time in which these polls were to be conducted and if, on the other hand, agencies like Statistics Canada were asked to conduct these polls, in that case, I think we could make regulations which would allow public opinion to take shape under reasonable conditions. However, in the present context, I do not think it would be wise to prohibit all polls by saying afterwards: "We will regulate them".

I believe it would be much more useful in the interests of our electoral traditions and especially of the protection that we, as members of Parliament, must ensure our fellow citizens, if we were to introduce immediate regulations, some legislation that we could discuss and assess as against the results of the investigations which could be carried out on the value of polls.

I am not one of those who would be the first to restrict public opinion or favour measures restricting freedom of speech. However, I realize, as do all my colleagues, that there are all kinds of exaggerations and that these methods are used to serve all kinds of purposes. However, Mr. Speaker, I do not think the best way of arriving at an acceptable situation is to ignore polls. In fact, all commercial agencies use polls when they want to market a product and all political parties, whatever their colour, make good internal use of polls.

Of course, when it comes to electoral strategy, it is very easy to say that the results are in our favour and that such

[Mr. Joyal.]

or such candidate is ahead. However, I am of the opinion that, before getting rid of this technique which, at present, gives appreciable results, we had better try and put forward a legislation which would allow us to make surveys in acceptable conditions, rather than simply proposing to abolish them. When organizations conducted polls or surveys to determine the unemployment rate in this country, before the establishment of Statistics Canada, we did not think very high of the results, but now that a duly authorized organization such as Statistics Canada makes known the results of its monthly surveys conducted according to specific standards and criteria, these surveys are given the credibility they deserve and are useful in the development of economic policies.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that it is the same with polls. We should manage to propose—and this is something I suggest to my hon. colleague who sponsored bill C-213—regulations on polls, to authorize some professional agencies rather than simply abolish polls and ignore that this technique is useful and may be of use to the electorate. As for me, I do not think that the proposed results could be achieved simply by abolishing polls under the pretence of the exaggerations or dishonest actions which may happen in public opinion and under the pretence of the manipulation of public opinion; Mr. Speaker, one must admit that the number of voters who may be affected by the results of a poll varies with the elections.

There are elections in which the opinion of a majority of voters is already set in favour of a party. There are election situations in which the public opinion is quite divided between the policies and the mandates proposed by different parties. Finally, there are elections in which the outcome seems so remote that the majority of voters take no interest in them. I do not think, Mr. Speaker, that we have enough information nor sufficient evidence at this moment to accept, as my colleague suggests, to purely and simply do away with the taking of polls during election periods, and once the writs are issued.

I rather think, Mr. Speaker, that all parties who really want to improve our election habits should further their studies in that respect on an individual basis in an effort to determine the extent to which polls affect public opinion and propose regulations rather than merely ignore the polls. I would like to relate that question to the financing of political parties. The financing of political parties has been under attack for several years, particularly the obscurantism of election funds involving all sorts of tinkering with the financing of political parties and election costs. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, it would have been simplistic for the House of Commons to decide overnight to do away with all contributions to political parties simply because there was a risk of tinkering on the part of candidates of a party or the government. Parliament looked into that matter during the 29th Parliament and passed a very complex legislation. I think all political parties that are now prepared to apply it realize that. I think progress was made in that direction, and I would think that we should follow that example if we want to improve our political habits about public information. That is why, Mr. Speaker, I would purely and simply ask that this bill be withdrawn since in its present form it does not contain enough material to be referred to committee.