

Election Expenses

One could very well argue that despite the strenuous effort made by the committee, to which reference has been made—and I along with other members certainly appreciate those efforts—the introduction of this particular clause which refers to goods or services provided by a government in many ways is completely redundant. I think the hon. member for Skeena really zeroed in on the point of concern, particularly when he quoted a study made on this subject.

● (1720)

In practical terms, the question of government expenses in the context of a federal election is a matter of an incidental service provided to the party from which the current government has been drawn prior to the dissolution of parliament, because of the fact that even though parliament is dissolved ministers of the Crown remain in office. That, to me, is the nub of the proposal put forward by the hon. member for Skeena and by myself in the consequential amendment. Otherwise, we are dealing with a very loose term when we talk about services provided by government. I am glad to know the committee did not go along with the suggestion that would have resulted in a chartered accountant, as an official agent, having to follow a candidate every step of the way during an election, but that rather the bill would provide relatively simple and relatively inexpensive auditing procedures.

That brings me back to the fact that I have already mentioned, namely, that for the first time we are seeking to put a definition of election expenses into the Canada Elections Act, an act which many people at first blush have often considered to be a rather extensive and complicated document, and which is in reality in many respects one of the most clearly stated pieces of law that we have in this country. I say this because countless thousands of people over the years have been able to work on the basis of the Canada Elections Act and the information material that comes from the Chief Electoral Officer, and to conduct elections in most respects in accordance with the law.

I think one of our concerns at any time should be to keep the Elections Act understandable to lay people and not to have a law that can be understood only by those who are learned in the law or who sit on the bench. As I listened to the discussion this afternoon I tried to imagine the average person who is called upon to act as a candidate's official agent and who reads in this piece of legislation "the cost of goods or services provided by a government". Perhaps if one went to the absurd, one might say that every time you turn around you find goods or services being provided by a government. Every time we drive on the highway we take advantage of services provided by a government, either provincial or municipal.

So just what does the bill, as it stands, mean? What are the services provided by a government? I would suggest, with all deference to the efforts of the standing committee, that perhaps they had not sufficiently thought through what they were putting into this act from the point of view of its being readily understood when they used the general term "government". If one considers that with the fact of what is stated in subclause (c), "the commercial value of goods and services donated", one finds that if one purchases goods from a municipal government or rents a schoolroom from a school board, it is

[Mr. Barnett.]

readily understandable that one pays for that service the way one would if one were renting a hall from a private organization. The rental would be based on normal commercial value. That is the way the total cost of an election is to be calculated under the Election Act if this law is put into effect.

It seems to me that the amendment which the hon. member for Skeena and I have proposed zeroes in on a specific situation which all members of the House know exists, and that is the fact that there are incidental services which are available to the political party to which the ministers of the Crown belong after a dissolution that are not available to any other political party or any other candidates. Those kinds of expenses and services, whether they be for transportation or for other reasons during an election period, should properly be included in the kinds of expenses that are calculated as being expenses of a party or expenses of candidates who happen to be ministers of the Crown or in aid of whom ministers of the Crown are working.

That is the point of the amendments which stand in the name of the hon. member for Skeena and myself. Therefore, I ask the House at this point to give serious consideration to the idea that this will provide an improvement to the act, that it will make it more clear, more readily understandable and that it will certainly not mean that services or goods which may be provided by other agencies of the government at other levels will not be within the ambit of normal election expenses. Without in any way attempting to prolong this discussion, let me say that these are the points which I would ask hon. members to consider and which I think make the amendments worthy of support.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Boulanger): Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. Members: Question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Boulanger): All those in favour will please say yea.

Some hon. Members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Boulanger): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. Members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Boulanger): In my opinion the nays have it.

Motion No. 2 (Mr. Howard) and motion No. 30 (Mr. Barnett) negatived.