

Canada Elections Act

imposed on a rural constituency if the time is changed. It is in that context that I hope Your Honour will consider listening to additional remarks I have to make on this subject matter.

It is imperative that there be some reconsideration of the whole system of proxy voting, particularly if election campaigns are to be shorter. In an urban constituency the act lends itself to prompt accommodation of the proxy voter who happens to live in that urban constituency; but if we put further time constraints on this act, we will be putting additional constraints upon the time in which a proxy vote can be cast in a rural constituency. There will be a reduction in the amount of time in which the work force of any party will be able to prepare for the facilitation of proxy voting. Therefore, in conjunction with a reduction in the election period I think some consideration should be given to the terms under which proxy votes, absentee ballots and the votes of debilitated people and others can be cast.

If Your Honour will bear with me, I would like to suggest that, in rural constituencies in particular, returning officers should have the capacity to appoint deputies considered by them to be capable. The procedure followed, of course, would be defined either by legislation or regulation. However, a delegate of a returning officer should be permitted to accept, receive or collect proxy votes. Under the present system time is short in a rural constituency. For instance, during the last election campaign the returning officer for my constituency was located at one end of the constituency. I do not quarrel with that. However, if we are to have time to get the work done, the returning officer should have appointees who can do his duties and take his place in the outlying areas of the constituency.

I said I did not want to be political, and I do not; I merely want proper consideration given to this legislation as it relates to time. When we reduce the amount of time, we affect the total campaign in a rural constituency. If the time is to be shortened, I think there should be a system whereby supplies needed by candidates are delivered promptly by the returning officer. Sufficient supplies should be delivered by the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada to returning officers so that representatives of candidates will not have to make three trips, as my staff did in the last election campaign, to obtain necessary forms such as agents' papers.

If we are going to cut the time, it is imperative that the Chief Electoral Officer put everything required in place on the first go around. I do not want to have to make three trips again, nor do I wish to impose that upon any candidate who may succeed me. I suggest that the returning officer should be able to appoint certain agents to conduct, for instance, advance polls. If there is to be a constraint in time, it would be a very excellent idea if the deputy returning officer in the advance poll could almost automatically become an appointee of the returning officer in a rural constituency to receive and perhaps to make available those votes required in proxy or absentee voting or from disabled voters. I think that is the spirit and intent of the act, but if we constrain the time it will be even worse than it has been to date.

● (1450)

If the House will just bear with me a minute, I will not take much time—

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McCain: —on this subject matter but I am—and I announce this in advance—going to deviate from the constraints you have imposed on me; that is, with your generous permission.

There has been a serious difficulty in some constituencies in Canada, by virtue of lack of co-operation between provincial and federal returning officers, in the establishment of poll boundaries. In a non-political way I appeal to this House of Commons, as a group participating in government, can we not demand of the Chief Electoral Officer and, in turn, his returning officers that there should be co-ordination between provincial and federal returning officers so that poll boundaries can be common? You have no idea, Mr. Speaker, of the difficulty this can create in some areas. In cities it does not make any difference, but in rural communities traditional boundaries are of major significance. I thank you very much for your generosity on that one, because I do think it needs to be on the record.

I think it is very difficult to discuss the subject matter of reduction of time in an election, and as you are considering it, Mr. Speaker, do not consider it on an urban basis. There is so much difference. With all due respect—and no allegations or accusations are made—if I were the candidate for the city of Saint John I really would not need much more than a bicycle, particularly if I wanted exercise. I could bicycle across the constituency in ten or 15 minutes. Even the hon. member for Northumberland-Miramichi (Mr. Dionne) experiences a great deal more difficulty in conducting a campaign than does the member from Saint John.

I think the time constraints are going to have a very definite impact. It may be necessary to give further consideration to more of this act than just the one section as you look at it from the rural point of view. We are not just changing time per se; we are going to change the entire pattern of contact between the rural candidate and his constituency. I think we have to give consideration to perhaps a little bit more allowance for expenses of rural candidates than we have given.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): That is relevant.

Mr. McCain: I say this because I want to point out the difficulties of advertising in a rural constituency. Again I come back to the city of Saint John, New Brunswick, which I know so well. One can use any one of each section of the media and advertise in that constituency effectively, but if a candidate in Carleton-Charlotte stays within the legal constraints of expenditures, I have to look as a candidate at the city of Fredericton, Saint John and Moncton for television and radio. I have to look at Woodstock, Fredericton and Saint John again for press. I have to look at all the weeklies, all dailies, the radio stations and television stations that cover the southwest part