

Dominion Elections Act

no less than two sets of officers investigating the situation on the spot, will reach the conclusion that, while certainly votes were cast improperly at Greenwood, the improper casting of those votes was in no way due to any irregularities in the conduct of the polls, but was due to the fact that some of the men made a declaration of residence on the outside of the envelope which was not in accordance with the defence services voting regulations.

Mr. Green: The minister is not referring to the Greenwood riding?

Mr. Claxton: No, the Greenwood R.C.A.F. station where the poll was held. The riding, of course, was Annapolis-Kings.

Mr. Green: In Nova Scotia?

Mr. Claxton: In Nova Scotia. Most of the service votes were quite properly cast there.

The explanation of how this arose is, I believe, simple, but is due to a rather complicated situation. Before the war there were no special regulations for taking the service vote; the ordinary civil procedure applied. In 1940 special regulations were adopted, and those were in effect in the general elections of 1940 and 1945. By and large, they gave satisfaction. I believe that no hon. member in this house will question the statement which I now make, that in the three general elections, 1940, 1945 and 1949, the way in which the service vote was taken showed a remarkable record of fairness.

At the conclusion of the war it was felt that the 1945 regulations required some additions to take care of the fact that service personnel would now be resident for considerable periods of time at stations which were at isolated centres. Accordingly when the election committee of this house was set up in 1947, the chief electoral officer put before that committee his recommendations as to the defence services voting regulations. The committee attached to its reports the text of the regulations as he had recommended them. Those are the regulations that are now in effect, letter by letter in accordance with the recommendations of the committee. The only change from the regulations previously in effect made in the regulations adopted in 1948, in consequence of the committee's report in 1947, was that the regulations of 1945 were amended by adding paragraph (b) to section 23 (1), to provide for service personnel having an option as to where they would vote. It is that option, made in consequence of the parliamentary committee's recommendation, which gave rise to the difficulty.

Those service electors who voted in the Annapolis-Kings election who were stationed at Greenwood voted in the place where they

were ordinarily resident, as that term is used in reference to civilian electors in the election act. Had they been civilians, they would have been entitled to vote at Greenwood for whichever candidate they chose, but because of the special provision in the service regulations in order to vote at Greenwood they were required to make a declaration prior to January 1, 1949, almost six months before the election. It was something that few of them could be expected to do. This matter was called to their attention in orders, but still, in the nature of things, very few citizens will take some step six months before an election, before indeed the election is even announced, to put themselves in a position to vote. It was that requirement and that complication which gave rise to the difficulty.

I think hon. members will appreciate the fact that while the difficulty exists and has resulted in much misunderstanding, to use the words of the hon. member for Nanaimo (Mr. Pearkes), and it is that misunderstanding which has given rise to this situation, it is by no means an easy matter to correct. It is by no means an easy matter to provide for a method of election which will enable service personnel situated at isolated centres, such as Shilo, Rivers, Goose Bay and a dozen other places across Canada, to exercise their franchise in the same way as an ordinary citizen would. Yet I believe it is desirable that, as far as possible, service personnel should exercise their franchise in the same way as the civilian.

The question was asked whether the committee would have the power to deal with this matter. Of course the committee has power to deal with everything having regard to the elections act. I may tell the members of the house that this is a matter that has been giving the officers of the Department of National Defence and the chief electoral officer a good deal of concern. They have been looking into the situation, examining how it is dealt with in other countries and trying to work out some suggestions that may be put before the committee for its consideration. But that is, I suggest, by no means easy. In any event, the committee and the house can be assured that in its work, with regard to both civilian voting and service voting, it will have the full co-operation of the officers concerned and of the officers of the Department of National Defence.

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I should like to say just a few words, Mr. Speaker, before this motion carries. A good many suggestions have been made today which I hope the committee will consider. While I may not agree with all of them, it seems to me that many good points