

Election Expenses Bill

The second principle is that we should diversify the support of political parties, or reduce the dependence of political parties on private contributors by contributions from the treasury. We have accepted that principle and the notion that it ought to be applied to serious candidates, namely, persons who get 20 per cent of the vote, and we have related that reimbursement or contribution from the treasury to the over-all expenditures of candidates. In other words, we have said that in order to draw support from the treasury you must be able to draw support from other sources in the community. We do not believe it is the function of the treasury to totally underwrite candidates in elections.

We do not think the citizenry of this country would be terribly pleased if we ended up with a bill that would permit candidates to run in elections in substantial fashion without having to get a nickel from anybody else or from their own pockets but could draw totally on the treasury. There is a difference of opinion on that. The Leader of the Opposition agrees with the position in the bill, but members of the NDP, and I believe members of the special committee, agree that there ought to be a contribution from the treasury in the form of a grant given, no matter whether the candidate can draw money from other sources or whether he spends anything else. The Leader of the Opposition and I are in agreement on these two points.

The third point raised by the Leader of the Opposition was whether the limits we have placed on candidates and on parties—

Mr. Stanfield: Also the nature of contribution confined to publicity, and so on.

Mr. MacEachen: Yes, this is the point I am going to raise and I will, hopefully, deal with that matter. Even though the Leader of the Opposition felt our proposals in the bill in respect of limitations on candidates and on parties were unsound, he went further than that and called them absurd. They are drawn entirely from the recommendations of the Barbeau committee. The Barbeau committee—and my hon. friends will recall that one of the distinguished members of that committee was Arthur Smith, a former Conservative member from Calgary—concluded that while it would be desirable and probably a good idea to put an over-all limitation on the expenses of candidates, that would be unworkable in practice.

The Barbeau committee said, let us put the limit first on expenses that are skyrocketing. Those are the words of the Leader of the Opposition and the hon. member for Egmont (Mr. MacDonald). What are the skyrocketing expenses of modern elections? I suggest they are media expenses; that is where the skyrocketing is taking place. The recommendation of Barbeau and his associates, including M. J. Coldwell, was that we put a cap on media expenses because that is where the skyrocketing is taking place. Members of that committee went on to say that these are the expenses which are obvious, knowable, provable and controllable: let us not try anything further because we will not be able to do the job.

That is what we did in this bill in respect of candidates. I believe, personally, though I have no theology on this subject, that it would be unwise to include everything in

[Mr. MacEachen.]

that ambit because it would be impossible to really know and control everything: let us take the items that are accelerating, knowable and controllable. That is why we put a cap on over-all media expenses.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Would the minister permit a question at this point? Does he not think that if a limit were put on these specific items it would create a situation in which money would be immediately put into other areas, and therefore this would be insufficient?

Mr. MacEachen: I do not know, but I think it is obvious to all of us that if you are going to run an election you are going to run it in the modern milieu, and the modern milieu is through the media of television and radio. It may be that some new technique would emerge, but I would think when it emerges we might be able to deal with it. For those reasons we did it in that way, based on Barbeau, and I believe they are sound reasons. I agree that there can be a difference of opinion here; but there it is.

• (1640)

I now come to the point raised by the Leader of the Opposition which I think is quite valid. It was made earlier. This is a matter which can be dealt with in the committee, namely, that we have related in the bill the reimbursement formula to advertising or media expenses. In other words, one would be unable to draw a contribution from the treasury for any expenses except advertising, broadly speaking. I believe when the bill goes to the committee it would be proper to alter it so that expenses which are legitimate under the law could be reimbursed in addition to expenses which for the reasons I have mentioned have been halved. The reasoning has to do with the candidates. But when it comes to the political party, in approaching the bill I probably have somewhat of a bias. It is this: political parties and candidates in Canada have operated for a long time with a great deal of freedom.

It certainly was not the intention in the bill to regiment, regulate or hamstring political parties or candidates; it was to put a clamp on the escalation of expenses in this field. Here Barbeau told us that the big change, the big increase in expenses by political parties in the last ten or 15 years was in broadcasting. That is where the big money probably will be spent in the next election by the political parties, if we are realistic. Here we have said that political parties cannot spend—with the co-operation of the Chief Electoral Officer who pays half—any amount of money greater than one half that which is required to produce 6½ hours of time. That is 6½ hours for all the political parties.

So when it comes to that big element of broadcasting, the political parties are limited. Barbeau said we should put a cap on that. We have put a dollar limit on all parties. I do not know who knows what an adequate and proper dollar limit is. The information given to the committee is that there is no certain way in which one could put an adequate cap on political parties from the point of view of information. Anyway, that is why we did it. If the bill goes to committee, members probably will want to take that point further.

There is another point. The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) asked, what is the point of