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DEBATES and PROCEEDINGS

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Bill No. 166 – *The Local Government Election Act, 2014*

Mr. Forbes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise this afternoon to enter into the debate on Bill No. 166, *An Act respecting Elections in Municipalities and School Divisions and making consequential amendments to other Acts*. And it's always interesting when we take a look at the very structure, the very heart of our democracy — the ability to vote, the ability to vote. And that's a huge responsibility, and it's important that we get this right. It's quite a thorough piece of legislation, and we just look at the table of contents and 194 parts. And I'd like to draw attention to a few of those parts; we won't go through all 194 this afternoon. But I do want to make sure we have some time to think about some of these.

I find it very interesting, for example, Mr. Speaker, that today of all days we receive our *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, and what's one of the issues that we've talked about is the Internet and Internet voting. And they're taking a look at it in BC [British Columbia], and so we're trying to keep up with the times. We're always looking over the horizon to what might be the innovations that we're thinking will make voting more accessible and that we get more people to participate in democracy.

We see that it's just unfortunate that we've had a circumstance where voter turnout is going down. And we see that and ironically, you know, we talk about the fact that at the three levels of government, that we talk about the federal level, the provincial level, and the municipal level, that actually voter turnout . . . Now I'm not as sure about the rural municipalities, but I know urban municipalities voter turnout is something like in the 30's or 40's per cent. In provincial we talk about 60, 70 per cent. On a good day it's in the 70's, and federally it's higher.

But ironically the thing is that we feel more removed from federal politics, less removed from provincial politics. We drive on the highways, our kids go to the schools, we use provincial hospitals so we feel like we have something to say about that. But even more so, we are closer to municipalities where I know people . . . When we talk about the city

councils or the RM councils, the town council where people will attend and be very active, and yet voter turnout is low.

And so this is something that we have to think about in terms of, are we creating or what are the barriers that we have in place to stop people from voting? We want to reduce those barriers. We want to get rid of barriers and in fact encourage people to be part of the democratic process, you know, because we often talk about taxes but what you want to do is make sure you participate. I mean it's the old saying: if you don't vote, then you don't have a right to complain. And so often that is true. But you know, at the municipality level, it is amazing that we have such low, low turnout. Now I don't know about the RM [rural municipality] level and that's something I'd like to know more about.

Interestingly I understand, you know, we've talked about and I've had an opportunity to talk to people about Aboriginal voting in urban settings, and we often are deeply concerned about the fact that First Nations folks don't vote much in federal politics or provincial politics when they live in the cities. But on reserves, there's a huge turnout and they say because there are huge stakes. And I think we have to remind people that that holds true, that holds very true at the provincial and federal level, that it is people's responsibilities to participate in the democratic process, and that's the elections.

Now we see here a very thorough list of items, as I said, some 194 parts. We think about this in terms of we've just changed our provincial election. And I want to talk about some of those commonalities and some of the differences that I see before us.

But I want to take a minute to refer to the minister's comments. And he had introduced this in December 1st, 2014, and he talks about how, that he has introduced . . . You know, this is second reading of Bill 166, *The Local Government Election Act*, 2014, and it is the new Act. It's not been amended. It's not an amendment Act. It's a completely new Act. And so it talks about some background, that this new Act is a replacement for the old rural municipality Act and The Urban Municipality Act, and:

At that time the provisions governing rural elections needed a new home and were tacked on to the end of The Local Government Election Act without any attempt of integration with those provisions governing urban elections.

So that created a lot of problems. So the new Act, completely a rewrite, language updated and simplified, and the pieces of legislation that are common between rural and urban are housed in the same sections, so that you have commonalities when they seem to make sense but you also recognize the difference between rural and urban if that makes sense. And I think that's obviously the case.

Some of the changes are relatively . . . It's straightforward. It introduces the idea that residence exceptions for students and members of Canadian Armed Forces, because students and members in the Armed Forces are likely to temporarily live in a place other than your usual place of residence. They may vote in a municipality in which they reside regardless of how long they have lived there. And so this is an important feature. And of

course we recognize the whole provincial aspect for Armed Forces members when we amended The Election Act that will guide the provincial election that's coming up.

And so I think this is interesting. It talks about the "Consultation on this bill started with a follow-up survey after the 2012 municipal elections, canvassing municipalities for any issues they may have encountered and . . . areas for clarification and possible amendments." So that was all taken into account. And they heard from SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities] and SUMA and the Saskatchewan Association of City Clerks. New North and school board associations were also consulted, but apparently they did not request any amendments. So again though, this is interesting that while they did these consultations with very important stakeholders, there may be an oversight to, why were there, why is it that there's a low voter turnout, and what is the implication?

So it would have been interesting to do, and we'll ask about it when he talks about the survey. They surveyed municipalities, but did they survey actual voters and about how they perceive voting in Saskatchewan? That would be an interesting survey to do. What are the challenges? What are the barriers? Why don't people vote, particularly at that level when so many of the issues they face are so close to home?

You know, I think about in Saskatoon, you know, the number one issue, conditions of streets and snow removal, that type of thing. People should get out and vote about those issues but they choose not to, but choose to make a lot of noise after the fact. I think the time to make the noise is during the campaign and participate in the election. And this is something that is so unfortunate that we see time and again, that people prefer to not participate but then to raise concerns after the fact. So I would have liked to have seen, and we'll ask this question in committee to the minister, what is it, what were the results of the survey and why they chose not to do an overall survey that would be reflective of Saskatchewan population in municipalities, but how they perceive their election.

I just want to take a moment and talk about some of the parts in the bill that I think are interesting and I think that make a lot of sense. Part III about polling places, it talks about agreement with the Chief Electoral Officer. I'm very happy to see that we're coordinating between the federal, provincial, and municipal levels for elections. Prior to this, they were really separated out. The feds did whatever they want to do. We're seeing a little problem in the fall, when there's an overlap of fixed election dates. If we can get around that, that would be nice. But we will deal with that as it comes. But it is good to see that there is some coordination between the Chief Electoral Officer and those at the municipal levels, if they choose to use some of the services, and in fact actually have some service agreements in place. I think that's really important.

As well, I found that interestingly in part VI, the voters list, the contents of the voters list, and I would have to follow up a bit more on this. We've raised this issue. You know, we've come a long way in terms of human rights and the right to know, and what you need to know and what you'd like to know, and the privacy issues. And one of the issues is the information that's on a voters list. And it seems to me that maybe this bill has got it right because it just says you just need to know the name and the address of the voter, and

you leave it at that. You don't need to know other parts of information that may not be applicable. And I'm thinking about gender markers here. That's not going to be part of the requirements for municipalities. Now that will be interesting to know if that's the case.

We will double-check what the implication is. I know that when we were looking at our own election bill, that was something we raised as concerns. But they felt that they needed to have that. The Ministry of Justice felt it was critical to have that, and as likewise, the Chief Electoral Officer.

And so that's that part as well. I've talked a little bit about polling and voting and the idea around voting machines and whether we will ever evolve to the idea of Internet voting.

It appears that in BC, the panel on Internet voting has come back with limited enthusiasm, that it's not quite arrived yet. It's not quite as cost effective. The proof that it will increase voter turnout isn't quite there, but we want to see that for sure.

The one that I think that will continue to be a bit of an issue, and actually a significant issue, is around the evidence of identity, division 4, "Procedures While Poll is Open." And we've seen this now and it's a concern that many have around voter suppression and the idea that voters need to have identity and whether it's one piece of picture ID [identification] or two other pieces, whether or not that has an impact on suppressing people, particularly low-income people, people who may not have picture ID. If you don't have a reason for having picture ID, it can be expensive and it's an expense that it's maybe a barrier to voting.

So we have questions about that. How will this be enforced? We know at the provincial level and federal level we've seen people turned away. And it continues to be an issue particularly in low-income neighbourhoods or communities that, again as I say, have been used to not having the same level of ID requests. And whether it's people who are low-income or whether it's seniors or people who've just not felt the need to go out and get a picture ID, who've always gone down to the town hall, who've always been able to vote, I think that clearly this is an issue, and it's one that we need to make sure that we're not creating barriers.

I mean it's interesting. On one hand, you have the Internet which allows us to do innovative, creative things to make sure people in the new age can access the right to vote, and access and use their franchise which is hugely important to a democracy like Canada. But on the other hand, we have taken a step back decades by introducing barriers where people must bring ID, and when we're talking about small communities where everybody knows everybody. And this becomes a problem in a place where that same visual recognition doesn't exist, what are we going to do about that? So it's a real, real challenge. So I think this is one area that we're really going to be asking a lot about and saying, so why is it that they must produce photo ID or some other ID, especially in small communities where people may actually know who they are?

And so, Mr. Speaker, I know that my colleagues will have a lot to say about many of

these aspects of this bill. As I say, it's a very significant one. Whether you live in an urban community or a rural community, a northern community, we all want to make sure we have the right to vote and when we show up on polling day that we're not turned away by some regulation that we thought, where did that come from? It doesn't make any sense. But we want to make sure the voting is fair and reasonable.

So with Bill No. 166, I would like to now adjourn debate on that. Thank you.