



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

House of Commons Debates

VOLUME 148 | NUMBER 081 | 1st SESSION | 42nd PARLIAMENT

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

Monday, September 26, 2016

Speaker: The Honourable Geoff Regan

CANADA LABOUR CODE

Ms. Dianne L. Watts (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC):

Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup.

Madam Speaker, I rise in this House today to speak to Bill C-4, an act to amend the Canada Labour Code, the Parliamentary Employment and Staff Relations Act, the Public Service Labour Relations Act and the Income Tax Act.

The bill would reverse a number of pieces of legislation that made it easier for union members to have a fair say within their unions via a secret ballot. It also ensured that union leaders were accountable to their membership and taxpayers by having their financial statements disclosed, as they operate tax free. This is no different from political members of Parliament, MLAs, crown corporations, charities, and native reserves, which I now understand has been reversed as well.

I have heard much throughout this debate, from all parties. I heard some of the most disturbing comments last week from members, and again from one of the members today, calling this original legislation “backdoor”, “anti-union”, “an attack on labour unions”, “union busting”, and that we, as Conservatives, hate unions.

I not only find those comments absurd; I find them frankly offensive. Many of our members have worked with unions and many have belonged to unions. There are seven out of 10 provinces that have financial disclosure requirements. Union members, past and present, along with the general public, supported disclosure, by over 80% in polling data when the bills were first introduced in 2013. When did accountability and transparency become so abhorrent to the government?

I have personally worked with numerous union leaders, union executives, and union organizations over many years. We did not always agree on every topic, but we still worked together. We still resolved issues. We still respected each other's opinions. More important, we

respected each other's differences. In past elections, I have been publicly endorsed by unions, and even in this past federal election, as a Conservative, I was endorsed by a union.

The reason I say this is to allow some balanced perspective to enter into this debate. Bill C-377, passed by the previous government, added an additional tool of confidence and transparency for workers, requiring unions to disclose the way that they spent their money. It did not regulate how unions could spend their money, nor did it regulate any other activity. It simply helped to give Canadians a more open and transparent picture.

Bill C-525, also passed by the former government, helped strengthen the rights of union members. It gave them the power to vote by secret ballot.

However, this bill, Bill C-4, would take those rights away from union workers. It begs the question of why a government, which insists that it is all about openness and transparency, is so insistent on taking away workers' rights.

I have witnessed the certification of manufacturing plants. I can assure members that this is not an easy nor a smooth process. I have personally witnessed the intimidation by both union workers and management personnel. A secret ballot lets an individual's true opinion be heard without fear of repercussions. By not allowing a secret ballot, we are putting workers, on both sides of the issue, in a very awkward and intimidating situation.

Let us never forget that all parties must work together to create a healthy and productive working environment. Jobs need to be created; they need to be sustained. Opportunities need to be provided for workers, and industry sectors need to grow. It is a symbiotic relationship, one that cannot survive without the other.

Canadians across this country have the democratic right to vote for their elected representatives by secret ballot. Abolishing the secret ballot is one of the most undemocratic actions that a government can take, and this is exactly what would happen with this legislation. A government cannot and should not pick and choose who gets the right to a democratic process. However, the current government is continuing down this path.

Not only are we seeing the lack of democratic process through Bill C-4, but we are seeing this play out in communities across this country with the so-called consultation on electoral reform. There is an overwhelming desire by the general public to have a referendum. We have seen it over and over again, in dozens of polls, in letters, newspaper articles, and in petitions across this country. People want a say in the way that they elect their political representatives. To have a few people gathered at town halls is not representative of the people's voice. It is one element to gather information. However, we cannot base our decisions solely on a few people showing up at a town hall.

By note, there were about 70 people in my riding who came to a town hall: the EDAs, the last candidate of record for the Liberals, some of their friends, and a very small number of people who were non-partisan. That does not represent the majority. However, I did send out a questionnaire to every household in my riding to ask about electoral reform, as well as having an online questionnaire. Overwhelmingly, the people want a referendum. They want a say in how they elect their representatives. They do not want politicians deciding for them.

Another funny little anecdote is that the issue of electoral reform was at the bottom of their concerns. People are concerned about health care, jobs, rising taxes, and a litany of other things. It certainly is not electoral reform.

This tells us many things, and it gives us an indication of what the current government thinks of openness, transparency, and accountability. People want a referendum on electoral reform and for workers to have a right to a secret ballot. Whether they use it is up to them, but they should have that right. Conservatives value transparency, accountability, and democracy, which is why we introduced those pieces of legislation in the first place. Bill C-4 is the complete opposite of transparency, accountability, and democracy. Therefore, I cannot support Bill C-4.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.):

Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech, and I heard her speak about a referendum and electoral reform. I have great concern with the manner in which she is assessing the value of town hall meetings that are being held across the country right now with respect to electoral reform. In particular in my riding of Kingston and the Islands, we had a meeting on electoral reform and invited members from throughout the community. I did not see a lot of the people who came as traditionally being supporters of the Liberal Party. In fact, we had people from throughout the riding come to voice their opinion. To discredit the notion that town halls can be effective based on the fact that it is just, as the member put it, members or friends who come to these meetings, is extremely disingenuous.

I am curious as to whether the member could clarify her comments on that and talk a bit about the value she might see in those town hall meetings.

Ms. Dianne L. Watts:

Madam Speaker, that is not exactly what I said, and I will clarify it for the member. I was speaking about the town hall in my riding and what that consisted of. I also said that town halls were a way of gathering information, but that they were not the entire way of gathering information.

Let us be clear. There is value in gathering information on many fronts, but when we fundamentally change the way people elect their representatives, we must have a referendum so all people can have a voice.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC):

Madam Speaker, when NDP members ask questions about the legislation, they talk about how the secret ballot is a bad thing. In my experience and from my information, the secret ballot is both good for the employer and the employee. Decision making for some people on whether they want to join a union is a private decision.

Is the secret ballot something workers should have the right to enjoy when they are making such a difficult decision? Could the member please clarify?

Ms. Dianne L. Watts:

Madam Speaker, this comes back to an individual's right. We have secret ballots for electing representatives. We have secret ballots for electing union leaders. We have secret ballots on a number of fronts. They protect and give confidence to people who vote, regardless of whether joining a union or not, or electing a union leader, or casting a ballot for the individuals they want representing them.

All of us have the fundamental right to a secret ballot so we can keep information to ourselves for whatever reason. Democracy is all about that. This is the most undemocratic piece of legislation I can think of.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC):

Madam Speaker, there is no question that this legislation is an attack on two previous bills, Bill C-377 and Bill C-525.

I find it interesting to hear my colleague, a former mayor of a major city in Canada, say that she respects unions. We all respect unions.

I would like our colleague to talk about her experience in her time in municipal government doing the proper process.

Ms. Dianne L. Watts:

Madam Speaker, as the mayor of a large city, we dealt with many unions. We dealt with the firefighters union and CUPE. We also dealt with private sector unions.

The fact is that we all need to work together. We all need to have a healthy work environment that supports and empowers us. To have anything else is unacceptable. We need to work toward that end. When we deal with all types of unions, union leaders and executives, we find that common ground.