

to be done properly with regard to rural ridings, change the legislation because you are the legislators.

Well, this is my suggestion tonight: let us amend the legislation so that rural ridings may be more adequately represented.

Mr. André Fortin (Lotbinière): Mr. Speaker, I shall speak only two very short minutes, because I should hate to contribute to a first class burial of this very important motion.

As the hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles de la Madeleine (Mr. Béchard) knows very well, I have signed the petition, together with my colleague the hon. member for Témiscamingue (Mr. Caouette): we fully support this petition which has been prepared and which, in my opinion, goes beyond political partisanship.

We cannot speak for the country as a whole; we can only speak for what is of particular interest to us, that is the electoral map of the province of Quebec. We are losing two constituencies and our federal representation would be reduced. This is a good enough reason to close ranks and to protest strongly through this petition.

The second reason, as stated by the hon. member who spoke before me, is that, as other hon. members, I did submit petitions to the commissioners who do not seem to understand that, on an electoral map, respect must be had for regional units, on the cultural, sociological, and economic levels, or for any unit, any community which is used to living together.

Mr. Speaker, one cannot divide a town in two. That can, perhaps, be done in urban areas, but not in rural regions. It seems to me that the commission members would have been better advised to study the map of the province, but stand back from it a little, to try and innovate.

They should also have tried to put themselves in the members' place, instead of sitting in their ivory tower, amusing themselves by drawing a map of the province of Quebec and saying: "We've taken away two of your constituencies, because we thought you had so many people".

Mr. Speaker, in view of the conditions, I think that the commission members have understood neither the importance of the regional unit, nor the role of the member of Parliament who, in 1973, wants to have closer contacts with the people, because he is a public servant, because a member of Parliament is a man who has to serve the people, regardless of their political affiliations. The commission members should understand the importance of ensuring that constituencies truly meet modern needs.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I take this opportunity to deal with another matter which specially concerns me, namely the constituency secretaries and offices. That should be studied well before the stupid electoral maps that are being proposed to us.

● (1800)

Mr. Pierre De Bané (Parliamentary Secretary to Secretary of State for External Affairs): Mr. Speaker, when one reads the debates in the House of Commons at the time the present Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act was passed, one realizes that the whole debate was on the difference that may exist between the number of electors in the different ridings.

Redistribution

As far as I can remember, the party in power, then under the leadership of the Right Hon. L. B. Pearson, suggested that this should not exceed 20 per cent more or less. And the official opposition was proposing, as far as I can remember, a maximum variation of 35 per cent more or less. Later—and I believe the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) took part in that debate—the official opposition introduced an amendment in order that the variation be increased from 20 to 25 per cent. And that was unanimously agreed to by all parties.

If we look—and my comments are made with all due respect for the commission members—at the map that was drawn up, we notice that the whole debate that took place in the House on that variation of 25 per cent more or less was not taken into account. The constituency of Gaspé, for instance, will have a greater population than some Montreal constituencies.

The whole debate, in the House of Commons, was precisely on that question. And I point out that when the government introduced the bill, some constituencies had a population 10 times smaller than that of others. Then it was felt that with a variation of 25 per cent more or less an enormous step in the right direction was being taken.

Imagine my surprise and that of other hon. members to see for instance the map drawn up for the province of Quebec and to notice that in 99 per cent of the cases, the variation did not exceed 5 per cent more or less. In my humble opinion, Mr. Speaker, it is an interpretation which is completely different from that hon. members wanted to give to the legislation which was passed.

And only to mention one example of an absurd situation, let us take the constituency of Gaspé, which I know very well; according to the map, it would be about 300 miles long, that is to say from Ottawa to farther than Quebec City. Is it possible to imagine that the population could be well served by an hon. member who would have such a large constituency to represent? Those people are already disadvantaged from the point of view of government services and, as the member of Parliament is of capital importance in those areas, because he performs far more duties than urban members—the hon. member for Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine (Mr. Béchard) mentioned them a while ago—I fail to see how a member, no matter who he is, will be able to represent adequately such highly populated ridings.

Finally, I believe we should think seriously of increasing the number of members in the House of Commons. Urbanization in Canada is growing extremely rapidly and I am afraid that, if it keeps up at that rate the number of seats in the Commons is not increased, the average population of each riding could well reach 200,000. Then, obviously, whole areas of the country will be represented by only one member.

That is why all hon. members will have to see to it that every citizen has equal say with his fellow-citizen from other areas, that equal representation is respected, while at the same time ensuring that geographical accidents and other factors are taken into consideration when a new map is drawn up.