

Electoral Boundaries Commission

be the effect of an increase in the number of members? If the total number of members were 283 the result would be that Nova Scotia would still lose one; Manitoba would have the same number; Saskatchewan would lose three; Alberta would gain four; British Columbia would gain three; Quebec would gain five and Ontario would gain 10. On the other hand if the total number of seats increased to 293 the result would be that Nova Scotia would have 12 and Newfoundland seven; Quebec would gain eight; Ontario would gain 14; Manitoba would have the same; Saskatchewan would lose two; Alberta would gain four; British Columbia would gain four and the others would be the same. That indicates some of the difficulties that are most apparent.

I have often thought that with a membership of 263 in the House of Commons the number of members is sufficient. Indeed the view has often been expressed that this chamber might be very considerably reduced in size, that the removal of the desks would make a tremendous difference in the quality of debate and make for a closeness between members of the government and the opposition—I am referring to propinquity. It has also been suggested that it would contribute to the informality that characterizes the British House of Commons. However the same distance would still be between us.

It is very interesting to recall that the distance between government and opposition was fixed in the reign of James I to be the distance that would just permit adversaries to touch the points of their swords. That distance between government and opposition has since remained, even though the reason for the distance has long since ceased to exist.

We feel that this commission, when set up, would proceed with its work on the basis of the present law relating to the total number of members in the House of Commons. It should have the power to advise re-allocation of seats in accordance with section 51 of the British North America Act, taking the last census into account in order to bring about equitable results. We would expect it to bring this to the attention of parliament and to recommend such change in the total membership of the house that would make a just and equitable re-allocation of seats without serious dislocation or hardship arising from its recommendations on the number of seats in any one province. When that recommendation had been made to the government, it would then consider asking parliament to make the necessary changes in the law to implement the recommendation.

In summary, therefore, what we are endeavouring to do by this resolution is to

take redistribution out of partisan politics. The experience of the past has been, except in a very few cases, that the gerrymandering of constituencies for political purposes has not been successful as an operation once the people have had their first opportunity to speak afterwards. This is a serious endeavour made by this government, after the fullest study of the matter, to eliminate the abuses of the past, to make the House of Commons truly representative, and at the same time give this commission certain ground rules and directions from parliament as to the principles that it should accept. It is an endeavour at the same time to grant flexibility in the interest of fairness in order to assure that the considerations that have always been in the minds of governments since 1867 shall be maintained.

It must also be pointed out to the commission that rural ridings must necessarily, in the experience of the past, have less population in general than urban ridings, and that there are other considerations such as geographical lines, rivers, county lines and the like which must be taken into account. But all these considerations shall be based on the assurance that an independent commission will bring about a redistribution that is fair, just and reasonable; one that will be determined not on the basis of the frailties of human nature, which all of us have, but on a basic principle that the political advantage of the government or a majority in the house shall not be one of the considerations to be taken into account or given any attention. In other words, as I said a moment ago, we want to follow the lead that has been taken by almost every nation—certainly by the commonwealth nations, as well as by the mother of parliaments—that membership in parliament shall be determined fairly by the people and it shall not be dependant in any way on the course followed by Governor Gerry which gave to this operation the name “gerrymandering”. That course which has been followed throughout the years since confederation shall no longer be followed in this nation.

This was our view when we were in opposition; it is our view today in government. This is another step forward in the carrying out of those promises which will make parliament more effective, stronger and more representative of the people as a whole.

Mr. Pickersgill: Mr. Chairman, I have not had the advantage, or the disadvantage—and I suppose that depends on your point of view—of taking part in any redistribution in any parliament, because the last redistribution took place before I became a member of parliament.