

The act provided that any redistribution must reflect population changes. It provided for the setting up of commissions. It provided for area hearings, to be attended by people who are interested in communities. It provided that a report with maps must be presented to the House of Commons, and it provided for debate in the House on the divisions within a province. Thus it provided for political input in the reconsideration of electoral boundaries.

Really there is not a great deal that could be added by a new Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act except to have it deal with some of the specific problems that have come to the attention of the House. I want to refer to those problems briefly under three separate headings, and I suggest there is no reason why the House could not solve them no later than July 1, 1974.

We will never get unanimous consent to the approval of redistribution because populations in some areas increase and in other areas do not increase. Thus those areas may lose members of parliament. In any event we all have the desire to maintain the status quo, to maintain what some people have referred to as our comfortable pews. None the less redistribution is always mandatory in a democratic system. If not effected the system becomes less and less representative, less and less democratic.

I wish to address myself to the specific problem that has come to be known as the Alberta problem, and perhaps in some cases as the New Brunswick problem. It concerns the situation where the commissions in those provinces failed to pay attention to section 13(c) of the statute. Indeed, in Alberta rural ridings were given more people than city people.

● (1550)

Clearly, this situation can be cured by this House. It is not a difficult situation to deal with. This House should not need 18 months to cure that problem. It is easy to handle. Why not direct the redistribution commission to pay attention to the statute? I was suggesting to an hon. member the other night that perhaps this could be corrected by someone bringing forward a court motion. If that is not possible, surely the government could work out a minor amendment for dealing with the problem. Clearly, since it is suggested that members need to travel around large rural areas, the populations of rural ridings should be somewhat smaller than those of urban ridings.

It may also be said that the commission in New Brunswick did not pay attention to sociological factors, as suggested by the hon. member for Carleton-Charlotte (Mr. McCain). Again the provisions of subsection (c) of section 13 are clear, and there should not be any great difficulty in dealing with this type of problem in a short time. We do not need to wait 18 months.

Another problem that has been brought to the attention of the House is the one I prefer to call the hiatus problem. It has been created because the two major parties in this House are almost the same size. The party I support has 107 members and the government party has 109 members. There is always a possibility that we could be required, in the interests of this nation, to go to the country, and my party or the government party would then ask for a mandate from the people of Canada to conduct the affairs of this country.

Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Suspension

One of the problems connected with the existing act is that when the act was passed nobody visualized such a tight situation occurring in the House of Commons. The Chief Electoral Officer has said, "I must have time after redistribution to get new returning officers and to set up the machinery for an election." So there could well be a period of, say, six months during which an election could not be held. But that problem is not difficult to solve. We do not need 18 months to find an answer. That difficulty could be overcome pretty quickly. We could deal with it in one month, indeed, in one week.

Surely we could introduce a system under which the effect of redistribution is held in abeyance for six or seven months. There could be two sets of returning officers who might be active during that period. If an election were called before a certain date, it would be fought on the old boundaries; if called after that date, it would be fought on the new boundaries. There is not much difficulty there. I see no reason for deferring the effects of redistribution.

If the government really wanted to act sensibly, it could say, "There is a problem with regard to the statute, and there is another in the administration." Those difficulties could be handled by a government that is willing to act. This bill, which merely delays the effect of redistribution, will not solve that problem at all. Surely the government does not need 18 months to find an answer to this problem.

The third difficulty is that alluded to by the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker), that of the provinces. I have learned from my researches that in the 1873 election, indeed in all elections until 1908, the province of Prince Edward Island returned six members to this House. Not too long ago Nova Scotia returned 18 members, Saskatchewan 21 members and Manitoba 17 members. It was arranged, when certain provinces entered into Confederation, that the representation of certain provinces would never slip below the number of Senators coming from those provinces. That guarantee was included in the original confederation deal.

I am told by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) of another important provision. To illustrate, let me take the case of Manitoba. There is provision for six Senators to be appointed from that province. Apparently if the population of Manitoba exceeds by one the population of New Brunswick, it will get ten members. On the other hand, if someone dies in the province or there is one person less, Manitoba's number of members will go right down to six. There are lots of peculiar issues like this which must be considered. They relate to the arrangements made under the British North America Act but they are not serious issues. It should not be difficult to bring forward an amendment that says, "Aside from the province of Newfoundland and aside from the province of Prince Edward Island, all provinces shall return at least ten members to the House of Commons. That would not be difficult and would not need 18 months to figure out. It would not even need 12 months to figure out.

My amendment suggests that the government should be given until July 1, 1974, to come forward with new proposals. It should not take until 1975 to look into this. Delay really will not solve the problem. If the government wants to act in these three small areas of real concern to do with