

Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Suspension

whether I will vote for or against the amendment. I believe it is important that this amendment be debated by the House and dealt with promptly. I believe that an 18 months' hoist is unduly long. One of our members has suggested that he feels the task could be done in 12 months. I was endeavouring to point out to the government that when the act was considered in 1963-64 many statements were made. Members of the government at that time felt they were settling matters.

● (1650)

Bearing in mind that over a year elapsed since the government again realized it had a redistribution problem, it should at least give the House the benefit of its views on why the period of one year is totally unacceptable, why it is not possible to do in the next 11 months plus, what it suggests could be done in the next 17 months plus. That is why I suggest that my remarks are in order.

I am endeavouring to speak to this amendment and to put certain arguments to the government that I hope, in due course of debate on the amendment, it will endeavour to answer. It is an important question. We must bear in mind that what we are toying with here is a fundamental principle in any democracy, that of representation by population.

I am pleased that the government house leader has returned to his seat because in my earlier remarks I tried to draw his attention to the fact that he was instrumental in steering through committee of the whole the original act that we are now proposing to hoist. Having done that, he is well aware of the problems of which I am speaking. Certainly the government of that time felt it was taking a constructive step ahead with the act. If that was the feeling in 1964, then Parliament in 1973 should have a full explanation as to why a postponement has to be arbitrarily given until January 1, 1975.

If I may continue, Mr. Speaker, I would like to put on the record the full remarks, from which I was quoting, delivered by Mr. Pickersgill when he introduced that act, the provisions of which we are now considering postponing. Mr. Pickersgill went on to say:

It was also agreed that in this process the government should have no more voice than any other part of the House, because this was a business which was peculiarly the business of parliament, of all of parliament, where we all have an equal obligation and, I hope and think, an equal desire to see that the people are fairly represented.

That is the end of my quotation from Mr. Pickersgill on his first principle. What Mr. Pickersgill was emphasizing was that for 90 years the Parliament of Canada had decided how representation would be handled, and he indicated that, after 90 years of this haphazard approach whereby members decided how representation would be structured, Parliament had an opportunity to settle the matter in a fair and equitable way, and could ensure that we would no longer be able to toy with this sacred representation principle.

Now only nine years later we find the successor to that government is proposing that implementation of the provisions of that act be postponed for an 18 months period. I suggest that before we go further the amendment placed before the House by my colleague from Peel South should

[Mr. Stevens.]

be dealt with in its fullest sense. Let us hear the reason why 18 months—

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Seventeen.

Mr. Stevens: Let us hear the reason why everything can be done in 17 months, but there is no way anything can be done in 11 months. Is it due to the fact that there could be an election in 1974? This is something on which some member of the government should clear the air. But in clearing the air the government has also to explain why certain provinces are being denied representation. Ontario is one. It would have 91 seats if the act had been allowed to take its course, but if not it will be restricted to 88 seats.

That is one reason I believe the amendment that has been proposed should be given some consideration by the House, if nothing more than a serious explanation from those on the government side why an 11 month period is unacceptable but a 17 month period is acceptable.

Having mentioned that the province of Ontario is one province that is being sacrificed, I would emphasize it is not only the whole province but in particular the southern part of Ontario that is being sacrificed. We in southern Ontario are being unrepresented to the extent that redistribution is not allowed to come into effect. Take my own area, for example. At the present time, defining the boundaries as you will, that area has four seats in this House. After redistribution it will have approximately six seats. In other words, it would have 50 per cent more representation in this House if the operation of the act were not stalled.

Here again I would emphasize that we are owed an explanation as to why the amendment is unacceptable to the government. We have been asked through first reading, second reading and in committee to accept the 18 month period proposed by the government. I have already referred to the fact that on May 1, 1972, the apparatus under the existing act commenced its work. It was on that date that the statistics were released and conveyed to the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. Castonguay. From then on we had a complicated process under way in which commissions were established. They held hearings and arrived at conclusions, and it is certainly relevant to this debate that there was no suggestion that their conclusions would be postponed until the preliminary reports were handed in by most of the commissions. As a matter of fact, the bill now before us was only introduced after the final commission report was in hand. Isn't this a little odd?

If you read the remarks made by Mr. Pickersgill when he introduced the act, you find he felt it was going to do exactly what we are now proposing that it should not do. In short, he indicated that his Act would take away from this House, unless there was a serious error, the question of how seats should be distributed. Now, some nine years later, really the first time we have had an opportunity to see redistribution based on new census figures, the government throws up its hands and says, "Let's postpone it." Perhaps this is gerrymandering in the 1970's style, but I do not like it. I want some explanation why the government has not been able to come into the House and say, "We feel there are certain situations that should have been anticipated with respect to this question; these are our suggested amendments and, in effect, we wish to rectify