

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Bélisle (La Prairie): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to participate in the debate today on Bill C-18.

As several members have mentioned, this bill is an act to suspend the operation of the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act in Canada.

The Act, which will cease to be in effect if Bill C-18 is passed, provides for the creation of 75 new constituencies in Quebec. This act also provides for the setting up of a federal electoral boundaries commission in each of the ten provinces, as well as in the Northwest Territories.

The proposal resulting from this legislation was to have been the object of public consultations in the weeks to come. This proposal, which seemed to me to be serious and well articulated, was based on the following principles, as is normally the case with this type of exercise or review: The geographical size, the density of population, the size of urban and rural centres, as well as other factors such as the common interest, the cultural identity and the historic evolution of the various regions and communities involved.

Except for unusual circumstances, the population of a constituency should more or less represent 25 per cent of the province's electoral quota. As you all know, this quota is calculated by dividing the province's population by the number of ridings allocated to that same province.

This whole review was based on data compiled in 1991, during the last federal decennial census—an exercise which takes place every ten years—conducted by Statistics Canada, a highly professional organization.

What is the impact of this review under the current legislation? Four ridings would be added in Ontario and two in British Columbia, while the number of Mps representing the other provinces would remain the same.

Quebec would still have 75 ridings, but most of these would undergo significant changes. The Montérégie, which is the region on the South Shore of Montreal, would gain one riding. Indeed, electoral boundaries are based on population changes, and Montreal's South Shore is currently experiencing the highest population growth in Quebec, particularly in its central and midwest sectors.

The riding most affected by this review in the Montérégie is Laprairie, which I have the honour of representing here in this House.

• (1305)

A new riding, called Saint-Lambert, is created around the town of Saint-Lambert, where I live. To Saint-Lambert are added Greenfield Park, LeMoynes and the western part of Lon-

gueuil, which together form the new riding of Saint-Lambert. The western part of the existing riding becomes the new riding of Brossard—La Prairie. The result is that the riding I now represent will be divided into two entirely new ridings.

The riding of Brossard—La Prairie will consist of the towns of the same name, plus Candiac and that part of the regional county municipality of Roussillon which is included in the parish of Saint-Philippe.

As I said earlier, the Montérégie will now have eleven instead of ten ridings. This seems sensible and consistent with the guidelines I described earlier.

The Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Quebec has, in my opinion, done a good job, and is to submit the results for public hearings very shortly. This proposal is well founded in terms of geography, population density, the size of outlying areas and other factors I mentioned earlier.

Why, after two years of work and spending \$5 million, does the Liberal government want to stop the work being done by this commission? Is it because of lobbying by a number of back-benchers whose ridings will otherwise be drastically changed or will disappear altogether? Is it because it wants to postpone all this work for two years, which means that, considering the need for new public hearings and a repeat of the legislative process, the next election in Canada would, as far as electoral boundaries are concerned, follow the status quo?

The best way to avoid upsetting a large caucus is to change nothing, and the government is a past master at this sort of thing.

I think one principle is particularly important: we should not increase the number of electoral districts in Canada. Two hundred and ninety-five electoral districts for 27 million people is already too much, compared with what we see in the United States and many other western countries. Each new member of Parliament costs more than \$1 million per session. Reducing the deficit also extends to considerations of this nature.

Bill C-18 would suspend for 24 months the operation of the present Act. The eleven electoral boundaries commissions would be dissolved and new commissions would be created within 60 days after the Act ceases to be suspended.

In our opinion, the 11 commissions have done a consistent and creditable job, but the electoral quota, in Quebec as well as elsewhere in Canada, will have to be increased in order to reduce the number of members of the House.

We are told that the process has not been studied in depth for 30 years, but should we redo everything, abolish the present commissions, name new ones and start all over again?

Why freeze the process for two more years? Is it to fight the next election with the present boundaries?