

Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act

matter what we think, we must try to achieve the principle of one man, one vote. In view of the nature of this country, variations are called for. There is the well known tolerance of 25 per cent up or down on the electoral quotient. Because of the vastness of this country we also have problems of geography and the problem of connecting in one constituency areas with different traditions, different occupations, different attitudes.

These problems are inescapable. The only way we can avoid them is by greatly increasing the number of constituencies or by doing violence to the principle of one man, one vote. Clearly, there is a limit on the number of constituencies that can effectively be represented in this Parliament, and certainly no one would wish to incur the greater danger of not having some equality of representation in order to get over these other problems. There is no perfect solution, and probably never will be in our country, to this problem of forming constituencies that are consistent in terms of their interests and occupations and which at the same time bear some rough proportion to the electoral quotient and bring about equality of voters.

We have established procedures which should enable all of these various points of view to be given their full weight and full play. The statute provides that before electoral boundaries are determined by a commission, the commission must hold public hearings. This gives everybody in the province and in the constituency affected an opportunity to make their views known, including Members of Parliament and prospective Members of Parliament. It will include in the next year or so any member of this House who, on the basis of his experience, has profound and sensible observations to make on the decisions of the representation commissioners.

Added to that is the procedure which has been referred to at length both by the hon. member for Edmonton West and by the hon. member for Algoma, of having a formal discussion in this chamber of the effect of the redistribution proposed by the commissions. This gives Members of Parliament a specialized forum, an opportunity which other citizens do not possess, to register their objections to the decisions. I do not suggest that objection would be registered personally by every Member of Parliament because I am quite sure they would speak responsibly on behalf of substantial bodies of citizens. Again, the procedure provides that after debates of this kind in this House the representation commissioners are to review their decisions and make such changes as they deem necessary.

On top of all this procedure the hon. member for Edmonton West proposes one small addition. He says it would add to public understanding and facilitate debate if in their report the commissioners give detailed arguments for the decisions they have made. There is nothing that prevents them from doing that. It may be some of them feel that if they endeavour to write long and involved reasons for complicated decisions it would have no effect other than to stir up debate. On the other hand, it may be that some of them feel there is no need to offer explanations after a subject like this has been in the domain of public discussion. Perhaps some of them feel that in future there are special areas where a full explanation is required in order to bring about full understanding of what has been done.

• (4:50 p.m.)

Great responsibility and great discretion resides in these commissions. I doubt that they would be assisted with the results they achieved if they were forced to explain in detail and at length the decisions they have made. Personally, I am not persuaded that the hon. member's bill, if adopted, would add anything of substance to this total process. I think there are reasons to believe it might even complicate the process. I do not think a case has been made for a change of this magnitude, and if the bill were to come to a vote I would be disposed to vote against it and would urge others to do so.

Mr. Len Marchand (Kamloops-Cariboo): Mr. Speaker, I have listened with a great deal of interest to the debate on Bill C-44 put forward by the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert). Being a neophyte in this chamber, I did not pay too much attention to the redistribution bill when its effects were first felt before the last election. At that time I was in the civil service and did not pay too much attention to such things. However, as a matter of principle I feel very strongly about this bill and the establishment of an independent commission to set the boundaries of electoral areas or constituencies in an objective and non-partisan manner.

I was interested in the remarks of the hon. member for Edmonton West to the effect that such boundaries were not necessarily set in a non-partisan manner and that perhaps other influences came to bear when the boundaries were set. After looking at the bill, however, I find both merit and some disadvantage in the intentions of the hon. member in his amendment. As I have indicated, I support his desire to have the members of commissions give reasons for their decisions in respect of boundaries but I cannot support any suggestion that the independent actions of the commission be jeopardized. To undertake such action would be a backward step.

The removal of partisan considerations in the redrawing of electoral boundaries in favour of independent non-partisan commissions was in my opinion a major step forward for democracy in this country. We are aware that debate in the House of Commons would of necessity add a partisan tinge to redistribution, and surely we do not wish this to happen. I gather from the remarks of the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton (Mr. Blair) and others that up to the last election there was much debate as to where boundaries should fall within constituencies. The hon. members had several advantages or disadvantages to consider. I suppose the greatest advantage sought by all was a political one because of the voting habits of the people in certain areas. Furthermore, the prospect of the House of Commons having to debate objections raised, however well-founded they may be, for each of the 264 electoral districts of Canada is staggering and, I venture to add, a waste of the time of Parliament.

Surely it is our duty to govern and take action on the important issues facing the nation. I for one do not believe a debate on particular electoral boundaries should consume time that Parliament could devote to the more important issues which face us now and which will face us in the future.