

*Government Orders*

Although we spent a lot of time on this bill, we have precious little to show for it. Of course, the bill before us, Bill C-69, contains a few sweeteners. These sweeteners are improvements compared with the present situation.

For instance, the provincial commissions will now be able to hold hearings before proceeding with their task, which is clearly an improvement on the current situation. The commissions will have to produce three maps for the regions they cover, three electoral redistribution proposals. If there is sufficient popular demand, the commissions will have to hold new hearings. Granted, the process was improved in this regard.

The bill also sets out the factors to be considered by the commissions in establishing electoral ridings.

• (1605)

These considerations or factors are described in subparagraph 19(2)(b), which states that, in determining reasonable electoral district boundaries, the provincial commission shall consider the following: first, the community of interest; second, a manageable geographic size for districts in sparsely populated, rural or northern regions of the province; third, the probability that there will be a substantial increase in the population of electoral districts in the next five years. And finally, the commission shall recommend changes to existing electoral district boundaries only where the above-mentioned factors are sufficiently significant to warrant such a recommendation.

It is all fine and well to make a policy statement like that, making community of interest a guiding principle for every commission. However, we inevitably come across another provision, which sets the maximum variance from the provincial electoral quota at 25 per cent. For example, if, in Quebec, the provincial quota was 100,000 voters or a population of 100,000, the commission would be entitled to make electoral districts with up to 125,000 voters but no less than 75,000 or equivalent population.

The commission may observe a community of interest, but note that the number of voters is not significant enough. Let us not take an hypothetical case, but a real one. At present, the population of the electoral district of Bonaventure—Îles-de-la-Madeleine is 43 per cent below the provincial quota of 50,000 or 51,000, but encompasses a huge area. This district is at risk; it may actually be eliminated. While this bill allows the commissions not to apply this 25 per cent rule rigidly, the considerations are so restrictive that I wonder if they will ever be able to do so.

The only time a provincial commission can depart from this rule is when, as mentioned in paragraph 19(3), an electoral riding or district is geographically isolated from the rest of the province or is not easily accessible. Who will define "geographically isolated"? The commissions, to start with, and of course the courts. No definition was provided. I consider the Magdalen

Islands geographically isolated. No one will deny that. Will the population factor apply? I suggest that the commissions consider this factor. Magdalen Islanders had their own electoral district up until 1968. Under Quebec law, they are guaranteed their own district. It is not that the hon. member for Bonaventure—Îles-de-la-Madeleine is not doing a good job at representing the district, but I think it would be highly desirable to have a member of Parliament just for the Magdalen Islands.

Magdalen Islanders will argue that they are geographically isolated, and I think that they can qualify under that factor. Then it will be a matter of satisfying the provincial commissions that the population of the islands does not vary too greatly to justify the creation of a separate district. But I can see a downside to this. While the new electoral district of Magdalen Islands gains a member of Parliament, the district of Bonaventure shrinks in terms of voters ratio. What will happen to the Gaspesian Peninsula then?

• (1610)

What becomes of the ridings of Gaspé, Matapédia—Matane, Bonaventure—Îles-de-la-Madeleine and Rimouski—Témiscouata? What do we do? There is a problem in the Gaspé peninsula. Does clause 19(3) allow us to deal with it globally? I am not sure. We need more information. This is a region with a dwindling population where MPs, whatever their political allegiance, have a large area to cover. They must cope with problems that do not exist, or that take a very different form, elsewhere in the province or in the country. The Gaspé peninsula is the first thing that concerns me.

Maybe clause 19(3) will apply to the riding of Manicouagan, which is indeed geographically isolated and particularly inaccessible, as my hon. friend from Manicouagan argued so convincingly before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and again here in the House at the report stage, if memory serves.

Maybe it will also apply to the northern regions of Quebec and Ontario. Last Monday, the ridings of Cochrane—Superior and Nickel Belt in northern Ontario were mentioned.

They cover a vast area and their population, with certain exceptions, is generally on the decline. Will the division be made strictly on the basis of the numbers? Will a greater deviation be allowed?

Clause 19(3) is much too restrictive, in my opinion, for us to give it our approval.

We had suggested maintaining, in the bill before us, criteria now being used by the provincial commissions when deciding whether to waive the rules. What are these criteria?

At the present time, a provincial commission may waive the 25 per cent criterion in any case where any special community or diversity of interests of the inhabitants of various regions of the