

Redistribution Commission

Mr. MacLean (Queens): It is not shameful at all. It is learned from bitter experience. In this connection I do not want the Secretary of State to be depressed or downhearted. If his approach is genuine—and I have no reason to think it is not on this occasion—we welcome it. At the same time, even if the hon. gentleman's repentance for past attitudes is sincere, there is bound to be a period of penance, or something of that sort, before we can accept all his suggestions at their face value.

Apart from that, this is an extremely important debate and one in which many members want to take part. There are two principles under consideration. The most important one is the method of redistribution. The legislation proposes that we embark on an effort which is new, as far as Canada is concerned, though it has been in use in a number of other commonwealth countries for a number of years. In other words, it is proposed that the boundaries of constituencies should be delineated by an independent commission, or by independent commissions, rather than by a committee of the house as in the past. Final approval would, of course, have to be given by the house. I think this is an important step forward. I think it is a step on which all parties agree, at least in general terms. But if we decide on this new method I hope those who are responsible for carrying out the redistribution will not be entirely carried away by the very good objective, in general terms, of representation according to population, right down to the last decimal point. Even at best, redistribution will have a profound effect or, at least, it will have a far reaching one. I am not sure that the effect will be profound; the composition of future houses elected after the next redistribution will probably remain much the same. But it will have a far reaching effect on the boundaries of all the constituencies in Canada.

I think we should realize, too, in approaching the objective of representation by population, that the constituencies of Canada vary a great deal in size in almost every province. For example, in the province of Ontario during the last census it was found that constituencies varied in population from around 29,000 to 267,000, while in Quebec they varied from 12,500 to about 233,000. This is a wide discrepancy. However, it should not be forgotten that these variations arise from two reasons, and I think those reasons should be kept apart in our thinking. One cause is a population change arising from the migration of people from rural areas to suburban areas, and the growth of cities generally. This

has resulted in large populations within constituencies which were mainly rural at the time of the last redistribution. There is another reason for the large discrepancies in population of constituencies across Canada: They were made that way for reasons which were considered sufficient at previous redistributions. In many cases these reasons were good ones and I believe they should have considerable effect on those who are now charged with the responsibility for redefining our constituencies. After all, it has generally been recognized over the years that there are certain areas which should have representation for certain special reasons. It has been thought proper that the northern territories should have at least one member each. We have also accepted the principle that there should be a certain minimum representation from each of the provinces which joined together in confederation. Thus, the provinces of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island are protected in their representation.

There are still further considerations. Over the years it has been customary for rural constituencies to have a smaller population than urban ones. Theorists may scoff at this and consider it unjustified, though I would not agree with them. After all, there are some who argue that members of parliament—and I would not pursue this reasoning too far—represent not only the people of their constituencies, but the constituencies themselves. There is some room to argue this. For example, I think it would be agreed that the member of parliament representing a vast empire like the Northwest Territories not only represents the people in that riding at the present time but has a certain responsibility to safeguard the great natural resources of that area that are now held in trust, as it were, for the generations which may populate that area in the future.

I think most members of parliament will also realize that generally speaking rural constituencies require more representation per thousand of population than urban ones, or this seems to be the case quite frequently. This arises because of a number of reasons. One is that rural people in isolated areas frequently do not have readily at hand the office facilities of the various departments of government to which they can go. Instead of dropping around the corner to the federal building and seeing the appropriate civil servant, they write to their member of parliament for information as to how to proceed with regard to innumerable matters having to do with government, such as how to apply for an old age pension or how to put in a tender on some small contract. Rural constituents have the habit of writing to their