

*Electoral Boundaries*

vigour of the representation made in parliament on behalf of the 12 federal ridings about which we are talking.

As the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert) said, few rights are as fundamental as the right of the people to have a voice in government. Canadian citizens demand representation which reflects their diverse and distinctive interests. That is the spirit in which the Parliament of Canada enacted the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act. So, the suggestion that northern Ontario residents look upon the report of the Electoral Boundaries Commission as disappointing would be an understatement. It would be a masterpiece of understatement. It is far more accurate to describe their feelings as those of anger, frustration, and resentment. Indeed, I must associate myself with those adjectives in expressing their feelings or describing them.

● (2000)

My colleagues from northern Ontario, particularly northwestern Ontario, have filed objections to the report. Most certainly we emphatically reject the reduction in the number of constituencies in northern Ontario from its present status of 12 to 11 particularly when we note that the province of Ontario is gaining seven seats. I do not need to dwell on the difficulties encountered by each of us in these more sparsely populated areas in attempting to carry out adequately our duties as members of parliament. The hon. member for Edmonton West has waxed eloquently on that. I agree with the comments I heard as I came into the House.

Northern Ontario is a vast, rugged region. Our communities are relatively small and they are very scattered throughout that whole incredible geographic area. Transportation routes by southern standards are not always convenient, and communications are frequently extremely difficult. The makeup of the population of northern Ontario also warrants mention. It contains citizens of English and French origin, as well as a significant percentage of those who speak neither English nor French, and indeed, and more particularly, one must recognize that northern Ontario contains a large population of our native people.

It is also important in conveying our views to the Electoral Boundaries Commission, which I hope is the point of this debate, to remember that in northern Ontario there are two time zones. At least three of our present constituencies in geographic area are larger than France. It is in fact further to drive from Toronto in Ontario to Kenora in Ontario than to drive from Toronto to Halifax in Nova Scotia. That gives some indication of the vastness of the area that we members from that part of the country have to try to represent adequately.

As the hon. member for Edmonton West pointed out, and I applaud him for speaking in a debate which appears to affect only Ontario, and as I said earlier, it really affects far more than the province of Ontario. It bears repeating that people in areas such as ours rely a great deal more heavily, and identify more closely because of their needs with their elected representatives, than those in heavily populated centres.

Because of the relatively small size of our communities and their distance from Ottawa, there is no question in my

[Mr. Andras.]

mind, even in the year 1976, that there is still a tremendous feeling and sense of isolation from the centres of power.

My own experience is that because government services very often do not extend into these remote areas and because access to the capital city, in this case Ottawa but it also applies to Queen's Park in Toronto, is difficult and expensive, there is a greater need for effective representation. It has been said, and it is very true, that a member of parliament in effect becomes an ombudsman. His role becomes far heavier because he is expected to supply to his constituents much of what is available by a phone call in Don Mills or a ten minute bus ride to an office in Windsor. That is not possible in our part of the country.

When the number of constituencies in northern Ontario was increased from 11 to 12 in 1968, that was applauded. It was looked upon as a great step forward. To reduce this number now by eliminating the riding of Thunder Bay would be, and is being considered as, a message to the people of this area that they will no longer be able to enjoy the excellent and exclusive representation that they presently expect, and justifiably so.

I ask, Mr. Speaker, have the problems which led to the creation of an additional constituency in 1968, just eight years ago, been resolved? Are the people of northern Ontario less deserving of adequate representation in 1976 than they were in 1968? I want to say for the record that the population of this area has not declined. What has occurred is that the rate of increase has not been as rapid as that in the southern part of the province.

It is little wonder that residents of the north have responded so quickly and so firmly to the electoral boundaries that they see thrust upon them. Throughout our region, municipal councils, chambers of commerce, labour unions, newspaper editorials and many individuals have objected strenuously to the proposal to reduce northern Ontario representation. I recall few issues which have upset our constituents as much as this. Residents are most concerned in northwestern Ontario, the area most affected. The municipal council of the city of Thunder Bay has unanimously passed a resolution protesting the change.

The communities of Geraldton, Schreiber, Longlac, Terrence Bay, Manitouwadge, Beardmore, Nakina, and Hornepayne felt so strongly about this issue that they jointly hired legal counsel to argue their case, so far to no avail.

There are precedents and ample evidence to maintain twelve seats in northern Ontario. First, in increasing the total number of members of the House of Commons, parliament sought to protect areas such as the maritimes, the Northwest Territories, and Northern Ontario, from losing seats. Second, parliament has departed from the strict principle of representation by population in adding a second seat in the Northwest Territories, an area not unlike our own in many respects. Third, the Ontario provincial commission recently went through the same process as we are in, and maintained the existing 15 provincial ridings. Surely residents should be given the same consideration by the federal commission. Fourth, the floor which is guaranteed smaller provinces is not only a safeguard of provincial rights, but also is a recognition of the difficulties of representing non-urban regions.