

After that the committee would be seized of the issue, and according to the President of the Privy Council it would be necessary for that committee to make a report to the House, he would expect by early spring. There would then be an attempt to take that report and test the will or the mood of the House. Upon that being done the government would undertake to produce legislation to present to the House of Commons, and depending upon the degree of agreement among all parties the legislation would be debated in the normal course in late spring, June, or in the fall.

With a minority House of Commons I think it unreasonable to assume that a major piece of legislation like this could be rushed through the House. Therefore the House would probably want to take a considerable amount of time on the measure both at second reading and committee stage. That is the reason for the 18 months.

In his evidence before the standing committee Mr. Castonguay, who at that time was the Chief Electoral Officer and not the representation commissioner, indicated that he felt 18 months was a very reasonable time. He made the comment in his evidence that he wondered, because we are opening up a can of worms, whether we would be able to come to a satisfactory solution to this very difficult problem in the short period of 18 months. He pointed out that the production of the present act took in excess of 18 months, that we were trying to solve a problem that had been bedevilling the Canadian Parliament since the beginning of confederation, and that we had never come up with a satisfactory solution. It was pointed out as well that we will have to seek a constitutional amendment, probably to the British North America Act, if we presume to increase the membership in the House of Commons to a figure larger than we have now.

● (1740)

Not only that, but we would have to reconcile the irreconcilable. The smaller provinces in particular do not wish to lose any of their current representation, and the larger provinces wish representation more in proportion to population than they presently enjoy. These matters were all thoroughly canvassed in the committee. Indeed the focus of the activities of the committee was on why we required 18 months, what would happen if we could not come up with an act to replace or amend the existing act, and how the process would work if we were unable to reach an agreement.

It seems to me that we might accept the principle that the existing act is not fair to Ontario, to large provinces or to the smaller provinces, which I think is the case. Surely the province of Ontario will not be equitably treated if it ought to have more seats than it will get under the present formula. The smaller provinces may feel they are not being equitably treated if they will lose seats. Therefore, this act might seem to be an unfair act. The mistake was made in the sense that the solution first brought forward in 1964 was not considered to be a final solution but merely a point on the road of finding a way to satisfy the desire of the people of Canada to be able to provide a representative House of Commons.

I think any member who reads the committee report will understand that the question of time was canvassed,

Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Suspension

that an explanation was given, and that 18 months was considered the minimum amount of time in which to attempt to do something we have been unable to do. It was not an attempt to lengthen the process. I think all members feel that when we become involved in the process of dealing with redistribution 18 months will be found to be an extremely tight time schedule indeed.

Mr. Ron Atkey (St. Paul's): Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the amendment put forward by my colleague the hon. member for Peel South (Mr. Blenkarn). Some time ago I had reservations about the reason for the delay in respect of redistribution. The remarks just made by the parliamentary secretary have confirmed my worst suspicions.

The parliamentary secretary spoke of a package of proposals being put forward by the President of the Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen) because, in his words, the present act is not fair. He suggested it is not fair to the large provinces. I question that. He also suggested it is not fair to the smaller provinces, that in effect, it is not fair to anybody. He called the legislation that will be forthcoming as a result of the proposals to be put forward by the government next fall a major piece of legislation. I do not accept that premise. I have looked very closely at the present legislation. I think the legislation that was first enacted in 1964 was a fair piece of legislation. With all due respect to some of my colleagues, I think it was one of the significant achievements of the Parliament which existed at that time.

When we deal with redistribution we are dealing with a very complex and difficult process which will not satisfy any single member of the House to a very full degree. There will be many members of the House who will be unhappy. I defy any government or any member of this House to come up with a scheme of redistribution that will satisfy every member of the House. Obviously there will be hardships. There is a price to be paid.

Let me point out some of the features of the 1964 legislation which, until this bill is passed is the law of the land. One feature is that the act removes partisan political considerations from redistribution, at least on the surface. It provides for the appointment of high quality, high calibre commissioners in each province to review the situation objectively and impartially. I think that is good.

Second, the act was very specific as to timing. The whole process of distribution was to be prompt, regular and not characterized by the sort of delays which so often characterize the political process in this House and elsewhere.

Third, the act really for the first time is very specific about criteria. Whether we like it or not, the act provides for a form of representation by population with variations. It allows a 25 per cent variation either side, which I believe is fair. It was a happy compromise in 1964 and is now. It directs the commissioners to take into account certain factors when applying the variations.

I should like to remind hon. members of those criteria because I thought they were good at the time and still think they are good if properly applied. First, the commissioners were to take into account geographical considerations, including in particular the sparsity, density and the