

*Government Orders*

A number of rural MPs were concerned about the geographic size of the ridings they had to represent. A smaller but also a strongly supported argument before our committee was that the urban ridings were growing so quickly they also became unmanageable for their members. It was rather odd to see urban and rural members arguing for two different clauses in section 19 of the bill which were at counter purposes to each other, both hoping they would be able to protect their own turf.

• (1525)

What this points out more than anything else is the importance of members not being on the front lines of negotiations when boundary lines are being drawn. In many instances members showed a rather sad self-interest in the whole process. They wanted to maintain the status quo because they wanted to maintain their own riding boundaries so they would be more comfortable. This is natural but that does not mean it is correct.

The other issue that we took exception to is clause 19(3), which allows boundary commissions to go beyond the minus 25 per cent rule. If the plus or minus 25 per cent rule was not enough, this clause actually allows the commissioners to exceed that variance and put additional ridings under a schedule. Our amendment deletes this entire clause. This makes the population variance an absolute number. This is listed as amendment No. 7, and amendment No. 3 is a consequential amendment to this change.

There are reasons for opposing exceptions to the rules. Allowing boundary commissions to exceed the population limits for constituencies makes whatever variance is in the act meaningless. If boundary commissions are permitted to exceed the limit any time they want, why have a limit? It would be like being allowed to exceed the speed limit if it were for a good reason.

The increased over representation caused by exceeding the minimum population defined by the variance would create more under-representation elsewhere in the province and that would stretch voter equity even further.

There are very few ridings under the schedule now. Many MPs were arguing there should be more. They were saying: "My riding is not under the schedule at the current time. I would sure like it to be there. Let us make sure that we draft a piece of legislation that allows for my riding to be included".

We saw many from northern Ontario. We saw a very interesting amendment in the Order Paper. Fortunately it has been withdrawn. It stretches believability that some members from northern Ontario could be so protective of their turf and not want to lose their riding, even though the population of Ontario

dictates that should be the case. We saw the same ridiculous arguments from the province of Quebec and the separatists. It is funny that the Liberals and the separatists should be speaking from the same page on this one, both trying to represent sparsely populated rural ridings, trying to put them on the schedule for partisan purposes. It is very unfortunate.

If exceptions to the rules are included in the legislation, everyone with a rural or northern riding will be trying to prove they deserve to be exempted. This will create difficulties for the commissions which will be faced with many costly and time consuming appeals for exceptions.

Liberal backbenchers may again demand the maps be redrawn to their liking if they do not get all the exempted ridings they want. It will be very interesting to see the response of many of these members when they see the new maps, yet again for the second time, and see their concerns were not addressed. We simply cannot draw the boundaries where they were the last time when redistributing the ridings.

If the 25 per cent variance has already passed for ridings within the same province, which will already be allowed to vary by 67 per cent, no further allowance can in any way be justified as necessary to meet the unusual circumstances.

We have in one end of the country Labrador. It is a scheduled riding because it is not a part of the island of Newfoundland. That seems to be justification for this large rural riding to be set apart. We see on the other coast the riding of North Island—Powell River. The boundaries of that riding are partly on the island but extend to the mainland. It is rough, wild, natural terrain, beautiful country. Why should there be two sets of rules, particularly if we have a variance of plus or minus 25 per cent to begin with?

If exceptions are allowed some ridings within the same province could be established at the time of redistribution which would double the population of others. In Newfoundland the difference between the largest and smallest riding population is well over 300 per cent, more than triple. Labrador has about 30,000 people and St. John's West has 101,000. Is that kind of distribution of voting power fair to the people of St. John's? No, it is not. That needs to be looked at.

This legislation will encourage that practice to continue, rather than discourage it because it has the very broad term extraordinary circumstances. Of course, extraordinary can be interpreted just about any way the commission feels reasonable. There is very little direction in this act as to what extraordinary circumstances are as far as isolation and difficulty of accessibility are concerned.