

*Government Orders*

[Translation]

**Mr. Bernard St-Laurent (Manicouagan, BQ):** Mr. Speaker, I will therefore talk about the amendment proposed by the Reform Party to narrow the deviation from the provincial electoral quota from 25 per cent to 15 per cent. First, I would like to point out that Quebec also voted against the Charlottetown Accord. Obviously for different reasons, but this is probably the only point in history where we agreed. This is just about the only time in the year that the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party agreed. It was, nevertheless, for a good cause, basically.

In order to understand what the 25 per cent and the 15 per cent situations represent, we must situate ourselves both geographically and demographically, since our role in the House is not just to represent an area and not just to represent people, but to represent the people in a given area. From these two starting points, we must look at the two elements in the process. There are regions where it is easy to comply with the principle through geographic juggling or playing with certain boundaries and thus relatively easy to move the scale 25 per cent or 15 per cent higher or lower. It is a matter of mathematics.

Clearly mathematics does enter the picture at some point. However, where mathematics takes a back seat is where geography comes into play. There are regions, not only in Quebec, but in Ontario and in the Yukon, where this is not possible. I am sorry, but our role here in the House of Commons is not a static role where we represent people mathematically. We are here to represent people according to the demographics of regional characteristics. Within the process, certain basic elements must be taken into account. I will give you a specific example. Naturally, I will give you the one I know best, that of my riding.

My riding is the third largest riding in the country: 465,000 square kilometres. It is a little more than half the size of Ontario, just to give you an idea of what 465,000 kilometres means. It is not the kind of vast area where people live in 10 square kilometres and the rest is forest. No, there are people living throughout it in its farthest reaches. There is even a place where there are fewer people—at the heart of it. So, reasonably, a member has to take the time to visit the people, and the people also are entitled to see those they voted for, those who represent them, whether they voted for them or not, because they are there to represent them.

• (1615)

Mr. Speaker, 465,000 square kilometres, that is over 82 times the size of Prince Edward Island, which has four MPs. Therefore, if we were to calculate the ratio, there should be 328 MPs for the riding of Manicouagan, which is more than the number of members currently in the House of Commons. If you want to talk math, so will we.

It makes no sense, except that there would be a lot of Bloc Québécois members. We are losing in all this, but what can I say? It is something we must accept.

Now, back to the debate, because we must not lose sight of any of these issues in the parliamentary process. And when we take into consideration goals that we must strive to attain and, I should add, never give up on, this is strictly in the interests of the good representation of the taxpayers who pay our salaries.

It takes three hours by plane to get to Blanc-Sablon, in the eastern corner of my riding, and if I want to visit other taxpayers in the north end of my riding, I have to first go back to Sept-Îles before taking another three hour flight. I have to block off several days, even weeks, if I want to go to Blanc-Sablon. In fact, I had to prepare a schedule when I appeared before the committee.

To really visit everyone in my riding, not in a whirlwind tour, but to actually go to each location and meet an organization, for example the municipal authorities at city hall or the members of a chamber of commerce, it takes three weeks non-stop, with no days off, and that is if weather permits. I must honestly admit that over the last year and a bit, I still have not been able to do a complete tour of my riding because all too often the fog prevents us, slows us down, makes us push back our schedule by a day. Taxpayers nevertheless have the right to meet their elected representatives. And it is the duty of elected representatives to meet taxpayers on their own turf so that they can better understand certain peculiarities, because regional particularities do come into play.

In the north, for example, we find native communities, where hunting and fishing are the main issues. In the southwest, which covers the area from Sept-Îles and Port-Cartier up to Franquelin, including Havre-Saint-Pierre, we find mostly mining and logging companies, naturally. Fermont is another mining town a little further to the north.

That is where the road ends. That is another factor to be considered. There is a proposal to amend the variance from 25 per cent to 15 per cent. When the road ends, it does not matter whether it is 15 or 25 per cent. These people have the right to live, to have access to food, to health and public services.

We are talking about quite a different set of logistics just to meet with them. There is no comparison. In this sector, 75 to 80 per cent of the inhabitants live off the fishery. But there is no road. There is only the boat or the plane, and in winter, the snowmobile.

We know what happened recently in Blanc-Sablon. There is a great deal of snow, Mr. Speaker.

In conclusion, we must not take our search for a mathematical formula to extremes. We must continue to be proud of the work we are doing, and proud as well that we are able to improve the