

Government Orders

(b) by replacing line 34, page 11, with the following:

"than 15 per cent from that quota, which"

Motion No. 7

That Bill C-69, in Clause 19, be amended by deleting lines 28 to 42, page 12.

[English]

Mr. Elwin Hermanson (Kindersley—Lloydminster, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, here we are again on Bill C-69 which started out as Motion No. 12 or 13 some time ago when there was a revolt on the Liberal backbenches because they saw some new maps which changed the boundaries of their ridings shortly after the last election.

Now we are at the stage where we have a new readjustment act nearing its final stage of debate. We are at report stage. There will be third reading and then it will go to the Senate.

We have proposed several amendments but they can be categorized in two major groups, the first being Motion No. 5 which has implications to Motions Nos. 1 and 2. Motion No. 7 is the other. Motion No. 5 is related to Motion No. 7.

These amendments are proposed to bring Bill C-69 into line with the principle of equality of vote. First, the population range within which constituencies are allowed to vary from the provincial quotient should be reduced from plus or minus 25 per cent to plus or minus 15 per cent. Second, whatever variance is in place should be an absolute limit.

Our second group of amendments takes away the discretion of the boundary commissions to exceed the limit in exceptional circumstances. It relates to clause 19(2) which sets the variable quotient at 25 per cent. Our amendment reduces the quotient to 15 per cent. This change is listed as our amendment No. 4.

• (1520)

Our first and second amendments are consequential to this change and are necessary for the continuity in legislation. They appear earlier in this bill which is why they must be dealt with first, even though they are consequential.

Let me touch on the reasons for moving to a 15 per cent variance in the population quotient for a province. Large variances in the population of constituencies are basically unfair. Constituencies significantly lower than the provincial average population are over represented in Parliament. Because the number of seats within a province is fixed, if one group is over represented another group must be under represented. This unfairness cannot be entirely eliminated but it must be greatly reduced to tighten the variance.

Many jurisdictions would see a variance of even less than 5 per cent. Certainly we are being most reasonable when we suggest the variance be limited to plus or minus 15 per cent of the provincial norm.

Equality of voting power is already stretched because our Constitution provides more seats in certain provinces than they would ordinarily receive based solely on their population.

A 25 per cent variance allows for constituencies to be established with up to a 67 per cent difference in population as of the time of census. Redistribution occurs three to four years later. The population variance could be even greater by the time redistribution is done. By contrast, a 50 per cent variance allows for a 35 per cent variance in population of the ridings within the same province.

A 35 per cent difference in population gives enough discretion to the boundary commissions to allow for considerations such as reasonable criteria regarding community of interest, rapid growth and the concerns of rural areas.

Allowing a 67 per cent difference in the population creates too much opportunity for drawing boundary lines around linguistic, cultural and ethnic communities. It is important that all aspects of electoral law treat all citizens equally regardless of race, gender, culture, religion or ethnicity. A tighter variance encourages the equitable treatment of all citizens by the boundary commissions.

Unusually large ridings do not need significantly lower populations to make them workable. There are other ways to accommodate those members and their constituents; for example, slightly larger office budgets or extra staff for travel. Increased use of communications technology can negate the need for some of the travel. When interconstituency travel is necessary, additional travel points can be used for travel within extremely large constituencies.

One complaint we heard over and over again primarily from Liberal backbenchers and also from a few of the Bloc Quebecois MPs at the committee was they were concerned about the unmanageability of their large rural constituencies. They seemed to feel that putting at risk the high standards we hold for the quality of voting power of Canadians was a worthwhile sacrifice to maintain their rural ridings at their present sizes. Some argued they were too large and should be made smaller.

The House of Commons is built on the principle of representation by population, not representation by geography of region. It therefore stands to reason that if any given area loses population, either in absolute terms or relative terms, on principle the number of MPs should also decrease.

It is important to tighten the variance used by the majority of constituencies because the legislation also proposes allowing special case ridings to exceed the population limits. A large variance in the exception rule is individually bad. In combination they weaken the concept of voter equity to the point at which it is almost meaningless.