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Chair

Mr. Joe Preston

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): I'd like to call our meeting to order so we can move along today.

We are, we think, in our last meeting on Alberta, and we've saved the best till last.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Merrifield, it's great to have you here today.

We understand you have a few words to share with us, and then the members would be happy to ask you questions.

Hon. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC): Sure.

It will be very short, because I understand what the commission is doing with regard to the boundaries. To put another riding in the northern part of Alberta is absolutely essential.

One of the things we looked at when we saw the first two maps coming out of the commission was that they were seized with the demographics, which is part of the criteria, but it's not all of the criteria. It's the communities of interest, identity, as well as historical patterns of the communities. I believe members of Parliament who live in those communities have much more information and understanding of how that would work.

Northern Alberta MPs got together and asked how they would meet the criteria for the commission and yet still meet the other criteria, which are historical patterns and communities of interest, and that's the map that is being proposed. It does change Yellowhead a little bit from theirs. The largest part of it is that there is a natural boundary between our riding and the north, or, let's say, the north part of Yellowhead, which would be the Whitecourt-Barrhead area and to the north. There's about 200 kilometres of bush, which is a natural break.

There are two communities in that, or actually three, if you want to look at the northern part of Yellowhead, which would be Grande Cache, Fox Creek, and Swan Hills. When talking to those communities there is a reasonable argument that can be made as to whether those communities could go north or south, because they do go both ways. To get the numbers, moving those into the north would be functional and would meet all the criteria. When you get down into Whitecourt, Barrhead, and Westlock, which are larger communities, they certainly don't go north. Their historical patterns are always south or east, and it would really go against the other criteria of the commission. Not only that, in the original map their

populations are so large in those areas that they would dominate that riding. I believe it would be unfair for the northern area because then their representation would be weak.

If you look at the geographic size of that riding—I don't know if everyone around the table here can capture just how large that is. You're talking about 15 hours going from one end of the riding to the other, at 120 kilometres an hour, in a car; that would be on a good day, if the weather is good. There's no airport, really, other than in Peace River, which doesn't have commercial flights, just to give you an idea of the dynamics of that riding.

The Chair: Are we anywhere close to where you can tell us where we're talking about here?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, it's the northern part of Yellowhead. I don't know if you can see it up there better than the one that I handed out. If you have the map that was handed out here, this one—

The Chair: Yes. It's the same one that Mr. Warkentin and Mr. Jean were using the other day.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, that's right. I think it actually demonstrates it better.

You can see Fox Creek, Swan Hills, and Grande Cache are on the northern side of Yellowhead. But all three of those communities are in the north. They're either in the Grande Prairie riding or the Peace River riding. There is a natural break of a couple of hundred kilometres of bush, between Whitecourt and what is called Greenview on this map and Barrhead and into the Swan Hills, north Slave Lake area. There are the small communities. Fox Creek and Swan Hills are very small communities, about 2,000 people, but they could go north.

The Chair: You're putting them where?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: They should go north. They would probably argue that they would like to stay south, but there is good rationale because they go north and south as far as their historical patterns and their identity. They could certainly go north to get the extra numbers, because I understand the commission and their problem with trying to get the numbers north.

The map you have there now with your names on it is what the commission is proposing.

•(1110)

The Chair: This is currently the last map from the Alberta redistribution commission.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: That's right. Once you have the names up there, it's easier for me to identify exactly what's going on.

The Chair: Right. You're suggesting what happens?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I'm suggesting that Whitecourt, Barrhead, and Westlock be in southern ridings.

The Chair: So it comes down into Yellowhead.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: That's right. Barrhead and Whitecourt should be in Yellowhead.

The Chair: So then Peace River and Westlock...the line would maybe go more straight across.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: The line could follow that river and go between Fox Creek and Whitecourt and just north of Barrhead.

An hon. member: Have you been drinking, Rob?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I can put this dot almost anywhere, you know.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: See? The witness can fight back.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I've talked to the mayor in the community of Grande Cache; they love it in Yellowhead, but they certainly understand they could go north, and they're quite comfortable with that. Fox Creek...

The Chair: Let's take them one at a time. Grande Cache would go into the new Grande Prairie riding.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Fox Creek and Swan Hills would be the other northern communities. I don't see Swan Hills....

The Chair: It's right above the break.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, Swan Hills is there. It would all go north. So that would be the northern boundary of Yellowhead or the southern boundary of Grande Prairie—Peace River. That would work very well on the demographics. When you look at the demographics here, they're about 11% under for the Peace River riding. That's within 25% of the criteria. But look at the size of the thing. It goes from there to the Northwest Territories, which is a tremendous size. So to have a smaller... I'm talking about this riding in green, and it would go all the way up. I think Chris Warkentin argued there should only be one MP at the very north, because you have a highway that splits small communities up there. That's all northern area.

It would be wiser to go with the map that has been proposed by the MPs, as far as the historical patterns are concerned, as well as the identity of those communities.

The other riding that is a little under the numbers on the map we've proposed is the Fort McMurray area. It's one of the fastest growing areas, as is the Peace River country. The demographics over a 10-year period would shrink the difference rather than have it get worse, if you want to look at it that way.

The Chair: Okay. Let's go to members' questions.

Mr. Lukiwski, clear up that puzzled look on your face by asking really good questions.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Regina—Lumsden—Lake Centre, CPC): I don't know if I can clear it up. I'm just trying to get a sense of which map we are looking at that was proposed by the boundaries

commission. Is it the one on the left, and on the right is the map proposed by Mr. Merrifield?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Those are the boundaries....

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: What's that map over there?

The Chair: That's a Google map of reality, and this is the riding that Elections Canada....

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Is there a possibility of getting the boundaries map as proposed and Mr. Merrifield's proposed map up on the screen, side by side?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, because this one over here is something different.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I'd like to get the boundaries commission proposal and Mr. Merrifield's proposal on....

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Before we do any of that, though, could I ask a question of Elections Canada? This has happened before. We get one map that I can't figure out. It's not the status quo, it's not the proposal that the boundaries commission has made, and it's not the proposal that the member is making. I can't figure out what it is.

Mrs. Johanne Boisvert (Assistant Director, Analysis, Electoral Redistribution, Elections Canada): The one on the screen is the report that was tabled by Parliament. That's not a proposal but a report.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: But that's the same as this one, right?

Mr. Scott Reid: Sorry. Hang on. You're saying there was the first report of the boundaries commission, whatever they call these proposals. So there's the initial proposal that came out in the summer, and then there's the report.... Is that what they call the second one?

•(1115)

Mrs. Johanne Boisvert: Between the two, there was the public consultation. Then in light of the comments received, they may have changed or updated their report, and that's the report.

The Chair: Why would we still be seeing that first one if they've done a second report since?

Mr. Scott Reid: Before we ask—that's your *modus operandi* for everything we've had so far. It's always the initial proposal—I think I've got the terms right—and then the second report. Am I right?

The boundaries proposal first, then their second thing, is always what you've been doing. Is that...?

Mrs. Johanne Boisvert: I think so far we've never presented the proposal as it—that first proposal—

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Of the commission?

Mrs. Johanne Boisvert: Yes, of the commission. This one is the report. You can always refer to the actual or the proposed, but the one we are displaying here is the report.

Mr. Scott Reid: I could be wrong, but I think what might work best—the committee can correct me if it doesn't think I'm right about this—would be to have two maps: the current boundary commission proposal, the one we're discussing changing, on the left, and then on the right have what the status quo is, the actual boundaries as they are today based on the redistribution of 2004.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Actually, on this one over on your left, your yellow lines represent the proposal that was in the last map. Is that right?

Voices: That is the report.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: That is the report, the yellow lines. The blue lines are what we're recommending. It's on one map and it shows you the difference.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, that's good.

The Chair: I'm with you, and I'm also with Mr. Reid that we need to do it consistently the same way, so that when we're looking at what's being proposed and what's being asked for by members, it's the same thing each time we're looking at it.

Mr. Merrifield, this is correct in your mind, yellow being the last report from the election redistribution commission and grey being what the members of Parliament are suggesting.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes. Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lukiwski, I'll give you your time starting now.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Well done, Chair. I think we've got her. I think I figured it out now.

Based on what you're saying, Rob, I don't have many questions, but let's talk about population variance. You say in your proposal it would improve the population variance?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: The population variance in Yellowhead would be up about 5.25%, which is tolerable if you want to look at it that way.

The largest variances would be the two large geographic ridings of the north. Because of the geographic size of those, if you're looking as a member of Parliament at the functionality of dealing with them, fewer numbers make perfect sense.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Sure. That is just because of the large land mass.

I guess I'm asking what changed between the boundaries commission proposal and your proposal in terms of population variance. Does Yellowhead become less populated or more populated?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It's a little bit more populated, but it's a little more than 5% difference, which is tolerable.

The major difference between theirs and ours would be these two large ones. This is 11% under and this is about 11% under, roughly.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Sure, but that's offset by the fact that the geographic land mass is so large.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Exactly. I think you'll see that Chris Warkentin's riding, which is the Grande Prairie one, is about 3% under. That's this one there.

Mine would be about 5% over, and I think Red Deer—Wolf Creek is about 4% over. Edmonton—Wetaskiwin is about 4% over, and Lakeland is 2.9% over. So they're all within very tolerable or acceptable variances.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you.

Just to reiterate, and I believe you went over this in your presentation, so I apologize if we're tilling old ground, but you say you have checked with both the members of Parliament whose constituencies would be affected by these changes you're recommending and all the other communities that would be affected by these, and everyone has signed off that this is a reasonable proposal, to your knowledge?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: The ones who might not like it, because we're all animals of habit, will be perhaps on the south side of Yellowhead, which would incorporate Rocky Mountain House. The mayor has been vocal. They would like to associate more with Red Deer than Yellowhead.

I've been talking to Blaine Calkins, who represents that area now. He says they may not like it, but it's functional. This isn't an exact science, and there are arguments that could be made that it would be as rational as you can get as far as historical patterns and points of interest are concerned.

• (1120)

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I think you're right; a lot of people in a lot of communities are probably creatures of habit. But do you think that anyone would consider this to be a deal-breaker, that under no circumstances would they accept it?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No, not at all. In fact, if this map we're proposing were to come out right now, I think everybody that I know in our riding—the municipal leaders—would breathe a sigh of relief.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Okay.

Those are all the questions I have, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Cullen, go ahead.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Sorry, Chair.

The Chair: Yes?

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: I take it back.

Here's the same question I ask of every witness: were the proposals you made here the same as those you made to the boundaries commission? Or did you appear before the boundaries commission?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, I appeared before the boundaries commission. We didn't lay out a map; we laid out the intent of how difficult it would be to represent that northern area and the massive population in the Whitecourt-Barrhead-Westlock area. That's a large geographic area that the member of Parliament would likely win a nomination from. It would be very difficult to represent the north, and the north, I believe, would be underrepresented.

So we didn't lay out a map like this because we didn't go that far down the road of what they were thinking, but we did present it to them. It was a unified message they got—

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Even though you may not have given them a map with the actual boundaries, did you verbally present to them these communities and whether they go north, south, or whatever?

Mr. Rob Merrifield: Yes.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Why, then, did they come up with this map and not perhaps listen to your arguments?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: That's a very good question.

I believe they were seized more with the actual numbers. If you look at their maps, in Alberta there's very little variance in the numbers. We understand more the dynamics of historical relationships between communities, their patterns, and the communities of interest in those areas. It's maybe unfair for the commission to be asked to do that without that information, so I can understand why they came out with their maps. But I believe the process would be more complete with our input because we live in these communities and understand them. We understand the dynamics of those communities much better than they do, yet we understand their job and meeting their criteria. So this map accomplishes both.

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Cullen, go ahead.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Rob, I want to get at a couple of things. One is about the southern half of this map, which is also adjusted.

Because it is so hard to read from the maps that we have, can you outline the communities again? Who are we talking about that would be included that is not included right now?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Right now, Rocky Mountain House, a community of about 8,000, is not included in Yellowhead. It's at the very southern tip. I don't know if you can see it; it would be right down here.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You're suggesting that Yellowhead be in the Yellowhead riding?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes. If it's in Yellowhead—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: How radical.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: —I think it would be functional. That's not a real problem. They would maybe argue a little bit, but I don't think much.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: We realize that the process is a bit disjointed sometimes because you didn't get to see the final map while you were testifying.

Mr. Rob Merrifield: That's right.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: But we've asked for—and some MPs have brought and some have not—supportive documents, from mayors particularly but also from other interest groups that may be affected by the changes you are proposing now.

Because you've had some time with this map, what can you tell us about...? You've talked about the north being easily one way or the other.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes. I can tell you that three ridings would be impacted. Grande Cache—I've talked to their mayor and they agree with going north. They're nervous about being too vocal about it, necessarily, because there could be arguments both ways and there could be problems in the community if some people feel one way or the other.

Fox Creek and Swan Hills would be the other two communities. They would probably argue that they should stay in Yellowhead because they've been there and they're comfortable. But their

patterns go north for education, for some health services, and so on, so there is a strong argument that they could go north and it would be justifiable.

When you start getting into Whitecourt-Barrhead, you can't make that case at all.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Again, in the southern end of the riding, because you're making adjustments, you're suggesting adjustments down there as well. What kinds of conversations—

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Rocky Mountain House normally would go into the Red Deer area. I don't think you can argue against that. At the present time, Yellowhead goes down almost to Rocky Mountain House. It takes in a couple of native reserves but doesn't include Rocky Mountain House. It's very close to it, so you're not adjusting it that much.

• (1125)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: One thing you said, just at the end of your conversation with Tom, was about the nomination being dominated by the south. I didn't understand what you meant.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: If you look at their map, Whitecourt is a community of 10,000 to 12,000 and with a large catchment area around it. Barrhead is the same way. It would be 10,000 to 12,000. Other people might know the exact numbers, but I would suggest 30,000 to 40,000 of the population being at the southern end between those three communities. They are very strong activists politically.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: So it would be a more active community.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I can guarantee you if they go with the commission's map, there is a very strong reality that it's where the member of Parliament would win a nomination. I know the politics of it.

Then that individual has to not be focused in on their communities and south, which is the normal flow of trade, and interests, and schools, and sports teams, and on and on. You have to go from there to virtually the Northwest Territories or almost under their map. The northern area would be under-represented.

I don't think this room captures the geographic size of that area. It is a massive size.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: The thing I'm struggling with in the presentation is—I get it now, but I had a hard time at first seeing where the in and out was, and now the maps are better—whether the inclusion of particularly those southern communities is a numbers exercise. If you're saying Rocky Mountain House is more naturally inclined towards the Red Deer area and catchment and community, is that to make up for things that have been dropped out by your proposal?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No. Their proposal also included Rocky Mountain House.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I see. So they're going halfway.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: We're not adding Rocky Mountain House. Rocky Mountain House was there.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I see. I can't tell from the southern change that you have. I'm getting a bit...

The Chair: You are agreeing with their southern boundaries.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes. The southern boundary isn't changing at all.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I can live with that.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I'm getting confused by that....

The Chair: Can this one be raised so we can see the bottom part of Yellowhead?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Do you have some dips down there, or are you right on the boundary line?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Down in this area you have to realize that's mainly mountain area and moose pastures. There are not a lot of people there. Rocky Mountain House is here, and it comes right down to actually the highway close to Rocky Mountain House, back down within just a few kilometres of Rocky Mountain House at the southern tip of the Yellowhead boundary.

The Chair: Rob, could you describe where the boundary currently is in the south of Yellowhead?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: South of Yellowhead it comes down to right beside Rocky Mountain House.

The Chair: So just north of Rocky Mountain House east and west is the current....

Hon. Rob Merrifield: The southern tip would just go straight west of Rocky Mountain House.

The Chair: So you're just picking up that piece, Rocky Mountain House and below.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: You're picking up the community of Rocky Mountain House. That's the main population.

The Chair: Right, and a bunch of geographics but not many people.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I have a final question. I'm not sure if my colleagues have one.

I know a bunch of these communities, but not all of them. I think we have similar ridings in some sense, although different. I'm in northwestern B.C. Your demographics are different but similar.

Are there one or two communities that dominate in terms of straight population or vote? You're pretty spread out.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No. Actually, Yellowhead has eight or so communities—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mid-sized.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: —that are around 10,000. That makes up the.... There isn't a dominant community in the riding. Rocky Mountain House going into it wouldn't be dominant and wouldn't be left out. They are about 8,500.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: There seems to be, both on your part and the commission's part, an effort not to include.... You go right to the edge of the Edmonton suburbs. Is that fair? You go right to the Red Deer suburbs—I mean the extensions, and not 30 years ago, but now. It seems you just go around any of those suburban populations. Do you include much in the way of...?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No. Right now Yellowhead starts at just out of Stoney Plain and goes all the way to the B.C. border.

The Chair: I can see your house from here.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: So it doesn't pick up much in the way of Edmonton commuters—

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: —and Red Deer commuters.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: There are some who will live out, but they're acreage people. They don't commute into Edmonton.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: We're talking an hour or an hour and a half commute. Okay.

I'm not sure if my colleagues have any questions. We're good.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Sounds good.

Monsieur Dion.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

To recap, Mr. Merrifield, your changes will affect how many ridings?

• (1130)

Hon. Rob Merrifield: The changes we're making will not affect any other ridings negatively. I would say the only thing they would do is take some of the population away from that northern, very large geographic riding, and that's why it's about 11% under in our proposal compared to the commission's.

I think the commission was seized with the numbers rather than discerning the demographic size as well as the historical pattern of the northern area.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: It will affect positively or negatively how many ridings?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It will affect positively all of those ridings.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Okay, but how many? Two or three ridings?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: The changes on Yellowhead would not do that. All of this area that we're proposing is in Yellowhead right now. All it would do is move three communities—Grande Cache, Fox Creek, Swan Hills—into the north, and there's a reasonable argument —

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So it's two ridings: your riding and another one.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes.

The Chair: Peace River, Westlock, and Grande Prairie are affected.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: What the commission has suggested is Rocky Mountain House moving into Yellowhead, which we could live with one way or the other. It doesn't matter much.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: On the other riding, you spoke to your colleague.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, all of my colleagues would agree with the map that we're proposing here.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: They agree and they have no problem with the proposal of the commission?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Oh, yes they do!

Hon. Stéphane Dion: They do.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Oh, yes.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: They share your concerns.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Absolutely.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: In fact, it's one other colleague who's affected.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No, it's Chris Warkentin, Brian Jean, Brian Storseth, and Blaine Calkins. They are all representatives of those ridings around this brand- new riding that is going to be proposed. We all agree that this map may not be utopia, but we can all live with it. It is much better than the commission's map.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I will read to you what the commission has to say about your problem, and I will allow you to answer. The committee should not ignore what the commission has said. The committee should say to the commission, "Despite what you have said, we think that this and that should be under consideration."

They say:

The communities in the proposed electoral district of Peace River—Westlock... share agricultural, forestry, lumber and resource interests. Whitecourt, Barrhead and Westlock are all located on established transportation routes, serving as gateways to the north and as service providers.

Is it...?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No, that's not true. Whitecourt is 200 kilometres from Valleyview, which is the next-largest community. You have Fox Creek in the middle of it, which we could argue, and have argued, could go north. But a "gateway to the north" as far as servicing that area? That's a real stretch. Barrhead is an agricultural community. It doesn't service that area. People don't come down from the north—maybe from Swan Hills—for service in Barrhead. They've missed that if they think the north is looking for servicing in that area. No, it goes to Grande Prairie; it goes to Peace River.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: It's important for us to mention that to the commission. Otherwise, they will say we're repeating the same thing we told them in the past.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Okay, then, mention that to them.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Yes.

Another point they made is this:

Presenters noted that the Peace River area has different trading partners and different communities of interest and identity than the southern counties.

They are suggesting they are from the north and they must go to the north.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes. Slave Lake would commute up into the Grande Prairie area, into the north. Grande Cache is the same way. Their educational system and some of their health care services are all in Grande Prairie. Grande Prairie is the largest community in the north. That northern area focuses that way. When you get into Barrhead, Westlock, and Whitecourt, there is absolutely no connection to the north.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: This is what the commission is saying:

The Commission is satisfied that the counties of Barrhead, Westlock and Woodlands are a reasonable fit with many of the communities in the north. The inclusion of the southern counties in the electoral district of Peace River—Westlock is desirable to increase representation in the northwest.

● (1135)

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I realize what they said. I'm telling you I live there and that is not the case. Just because a community has agriculture or forestry or mining or oil and gas doesn't necessarily mean it's connected culturally or historically or that it identifies with those other communities. It's not that there's that much difference, but certainly there's a massive amount of forestry without any population between those communities. We tried to describe that to the commission. I wasn't the only one who told them that.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So you're saying the commission heard your views but they did not listen.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: They did not listen.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I wish you the best of luck for the next run.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions relate to the maps. Can we put Yellowhead back up again so that the whole thing is shown?

Thank you.

My first question is not to you, Mr. Merrifield. It's to our people from Elections Canada.

Am I right that the map here is overlaid? The dark grey boundaries are what Mr. Merrifield and the other Alberta MPs are proposing? The light brown boundaries are the boundaries that were drawn in 2004 and continue to exist to this day?

Mrs. Johanne Boisvert: No.

Mr. Scott Reid: They're not?

Mrs. Johanne Boisvert: They're the ones—

Mr. Scott Reid: That's the report. Okay. The one on the right is neither. So what is that one?

Mrs. Johanne Boisvert: That's the report as well.

Mr. Scott Reid: How does the report have two different sets of boundaries that aren't the same?

The Chair: It's the same. It's the same as the grey one. It's the same as the brown one.

Mr. Scott Reid: So right here, it is different. That is different from that.

The Chair: I recognize that it's a straight line on this map and it's a curvy line on that map.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right, but that is not the same as that. They may be the same proposal, but they're different maps that do not reflect the same facts.

The Chair: I'm seeing the same differences as Mr. Reid. Is there a —

Mr. Scott Reid: That's right.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It must follow a river—does it?—going up there.

The Chair: They're substantially the same; however, I'm seeing a difference also. Are they different anywhere else?

Mr. Scott Reid: There may be other differences. It's hard to tell because it's overlaid. That was the first thing I wanted to get resolved before we go on.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I think it follows that river. One is a straight line and the other is a curvy line.

Mr. Scott Reid: It's conceivable that whoever drew up the map made a mistake. I don't know; I'm just trying to find the answer. It just confuses me a bit.

An hon. member: Or maybe that's a highway.

Mr. Scott Reid: Actually, Nathan, we should all have laser pointers for exactly this purpose. The next time someone like Merrifield tries a stunt like that on you....

The Chair: We'll agree that it's slightly different, but it's essentially the same.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right. That's the only thing I can spot, but you can see why I'm raising it.

Mrs. Johanne Boisvert: According to the report, the screen on the right is the good one. There may be a slight difference on the left.

Mr. Scott Reid: This is the one we should be looking at.

The next thing I wanted to ask is just a question to Mr. Merrifield.

You've explained a whole bunch of other things very well.

Down here, you've drawn the line through the middle of Banff National Park, as opposed to going around it. Is that of any importance to you, or is that just one of those...?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It's all mountain park. Nobody lives there. It's all national park.

Mr. Scott Reid: So if the boundaries commission just stuck with what they've done....

Hon. Rob Merrifield: That would be fine.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm just guessing. I don't know this. I'm guessing that probably whoever drew the map just found it easier to draw a line there.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Not one person lives there.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay, fair enough. I just wanted to get that cleared up.

The next thing I wanted to ask is—and this line appears to be the same—up here, there are a whole bunch of places where it's a little bit different. It goes in a little bit here, for example. What is the reason for those little minor variations?

• (1140)

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I think that's trying to get the population so that it meets the commission's criteria as closely as possible. That's just complying with my colleagues on that side who are trying to massage that line. I'm not exercised about that line and where it goes at all.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. I assume the commission is going to be rereading and trying to figure out the transcripts of this. I'll just make it clear that the first area we agreed was uninhabited is the northern part of Banff National Park, which under the map you've submitted would be put into the Yellowhead riding, but you don't think there's any need for the variation from the committee's report.

Then the rest of what I was referring to was along the eastern boundary. Your proposal has geographically very minor variations—numerous minor variations from the left to the right—but those are not key to your proposal.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No, they're not, and these are.... The map we put on is maybe a little rougher than what the commission might have to massage along there. We're not exercised one way or the other on that.

Mr. Scott Reid: In the event they want to follow your recommendation—and I have the map we're looking at—do you have a legal description of the sort that they include in their boundary proposals, where it says, “it follows this road and it turns left at this intersection”, and that kind of thing? Otherwise it will be very difficult for them to actually replicate what you're proposing.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Most of it does, but we certainly can. I wasn't so interested in doing 100% of the commission's work on those details, but just generally we're looking at trying to comply with the numbers so that—

The Chair: You would accept what they say on the east side of the riding?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: That's right. I'm not too exercised one way or the other whether they move that line.

Mr. Scott Reid: You have to understand the position we're in as a committee. We're supposed to look at your proposal and either agree with it or disagree with it. We're not supposed to massage it and say, “Well, we're doing what he recommended, except we'd like to make further changes”, especially because we're doing this after they've made their presentations. That's the limitation on what we can do.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Following the lines I have there I think would comply with what I've said. Now, whether that line moves.... Here the commission has the line going out a little bit farther and then in a little farther. I don't think we're too exercised one way or the other.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right. That's very helpful. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Latendresse.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Is it possible that this proposal was also made by Mr. Calkins, who came here?

A voice: Yes.

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: He testified about what happens with Wetaskiwin and Red Deer and all that stuff.

When Mr. Brian Jean was here, they were saying they did this all together. I think this is why the boundaries are different for that. It's the proposal of Mr. Calkins, I think. It would make sense.

The Chair: It's easy to ask.

Do you have a very clear picture of what's being asked by all these members, or do you have any contradictions in mind, any idea that they've asked for different things? No?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It would be more difficult for the commission if we were wrestling between members of Parliament, but we all agree that this would be in the best interest of the maps. It has nothing to do with politics in that area. This is just functionality of communities and ridings.

The Chair: Great.

I have Mr. Armstrong.

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Would you put up the map of the province of Alberta with the last proposal of the boundary commission—the whole province—just so I can take a look? Make sure I can see the whole north. Is that the boundary at the top?

Okay, I have it. That's a huge riding.

Can you go up there and use your teacher's skills for me?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, I can do it from here. What would you like?

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Just point to the towns like Whitecourt on this map.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I am indicating Whitecourt.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: The whole geographic area you're talking about moving the line from...relatively, we're not talking about a huge adjustment.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No, we're just taking Whitecourt and Barrhead and putting that area into Yellowhead, where it is now.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: But by doing that you're not really changing the geographic size of the northern riding. What you are doing, though, is kind of balancing communities of interest outside an urban area, correct?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: That's exactly right—community of interest. It would be a much fairer riding, and it's a little bit smaller in demographics, but the size geographically is more focused to the north and its common interests, in adding those communities to the south.

• (1145)

Mr. Scott Armstrong: I do know a little bit about this area because I have a whole basketball team living in Edson that supports Rob now, so there are 12 of them of the 85%, or whatever he gets.

But from the northern border in Yellowhead, Rob, is there a highway that goes right up to the top, to the Northwest Territories?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Well, there's the Alaska Highway that does go up. There are two corridors coming through Yellowhead; one is Highway 43 that goes right up, and one goes to Grande Cache and to Valleyview and up.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: If you were driving from the northern border of your riding to the Northwest Territories to the highest community where there are actually people living, how long would it take you to drive?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I'm telling you, it's 15 hours on a really good day.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Do people fly? Is that how they get—

Hon. Rob Merrifield: No. There is an airport in Grand Prairie. There's also one in Peace River, but—

Mr. Scott Armstrong: They're still far away.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: —commercial flights are very limited.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Tell me—

Hon. Rob Merrifield: But the population up here is very sparse as well.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: It doesn't show on that map, but are there some communities up in the northern part? How big are the biggest communities? Would there be 200 or 400?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Chris Warkentin represents that area. He would know much more accurately than I do. You have Hythe and High Level and so on; they're smaller communities. I really don't have the numbers. You might have the numbers better than I would.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Realistically, if that MP is tied up in the urban area with the bulk of the population, by trying to get around it, some people will see their MP very rarely.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Especially if he comes from the Whitecourt or Barrhead area, where the focus and all the population is. If he comes from the Peace River or Slave Lake area, then his focus is the north, and it's much more apt to be a proper representation.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: What is the new riding? Can you show that up there?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: The new riding would be this one. It goes from the middle of Alberta right up to the territories.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: In making the changes that you're suggesting, what effect does it have on the new riding that the boundaries commission suggested?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I believe it would be much easier to represent that area because of a common interest. Its population would be about 11% lower than the 107,000 that they're representing.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: It would be 8,000 or something like that.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It would be much more functional.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: It's a growing population.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It's very much a growing population.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Thank you.

The Chair: All right.

We've gone over our time by almost half an hour, but Mr. Cullen, by all means.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: My only concern—and I don't know if you share this, Rob—is that we don't really have anyone to speak for this new riding, because there isn't anybody. We've talked about the logistics of moving around this place. Do you share some of the concerns that I'm starting to feel? I don't know that territory, but it looks like a heck of a riding to try to serve.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It's a monster riding to serve.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I don't mean just in size, though. Some big ridings are not that tough. This one looks both big and very logistically hard.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Just to give you an idea, on the other side, you have a very large population in the Fort McMurray area. That's Brian Jean's. You can service the bulk of the population there much easier. Over here, you have small communities all the way through.

The Chair: Is there any chance of putting what is currently in northern Alberta on this side, so we can see the difference, as we've added this riding in the middle?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Would it be a difficult riding? Yes, but it could be much more functional on this map than on the commission's.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Your suggestion is that it's tough either way?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, it's going to be a tough riding either way, because of the geographic size of it.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: But it's better with your proposal?

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It's better with our proposal, yes.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes, much better, because they're smaller numbers, but they're all northern-focused. The MP would likely come from the central part of it rather than the southern part.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: The population base in the riding changes more to the centre, so that the people living there go north more, whereas if the big population base is in the south, it's going to be difficult for them.

The Chair: Mr. Merrifield, thank you for coming today.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: My pleasure.

The Chair: We have finished Alberta, except for figuring out what you've all said.

We have booked some time for that. Thank you very much.

We have a report to discuss and we have discussion on Alberta, so we'll go in camera to discuss those reports.

We'll suspend for a moment.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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