



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

PROC • NUMBER 067 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, March 26, 2013

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Chair

Mr. Joe Preston

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•(1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): We'll call our meeting to order.

We start today with the study for Saskatchewan, which, if anybody's counting, leaves us that province and two others yet to do. We're moving along.

Guests, it's good to have you all here today. We hope to be able to ask questions of you after your reports. There are five minutes for each of you. We'll do all of the reports and then we'll ask questions. We have one hour for this session.

Mr. Goodale, would you like to lead us off for five minutes?

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Sure.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you very much for the opportunity.

My objection, of course, has been circulated in writing, so I won't take your time to read through all of it.

I support the report and the map proposed by the majority of the boundaries commission in Saskatchewan, that is Queen's Bench judge, Mr. Justice Ronald Mills, who comes from a rural community near Prince Albert, and professor emeritus, Dr. John Courtney, from Saskatoon, who is acknowledged to rank with the leading three or four political scientists in this country.

Saskatchewan is very proud of both of them. Through long years of experience and service, they are steeped in the heritage and the values that characterize Saskatchewan. That, along with their reputations for intelligence and hard work, are probably the reasons why they were selected by the Chief Justice and by the Speaker to serve on the independent, arm's-length, non-partisan, quasi-judicial boundaries commission for Saskatchewan.

I stress all of this about their backgrounds and their values because both have been under a bit of attack by robocalls, and push polls, and the like. There has been a concerted campaign to discredit their work, and this committee needs to know that Judge Mills and Dr. Courtney are two individuals of very high standing.

There was a dissenting opinion in the commission's report for Saskatchewan, filed by the third member, David Marit. It is that dissent with which I respectfully disagree. What's at issue here is the strategic approach underlying redistribution in Saskatchewan. Mr. Marit argues for the status quo with minimal adjustments because he

supports exclusively rural or mixed rural-urban ridings with no clear urban voices.

The majority of the commission took a different view, consistent with much of the reasoned evidence before them. They noted that Saskatchewan's population is growing and it is becoming increasingly urbanized. More than 75% of the province's people live in urban centres of all sizes; 40% live in Regina and Saskatoon alone. Yet not one single Saskatchewan riding is distinctively urban at the present time. Not one. All 14 are either purely rural or mixed.

To address that, the commission majority produced a measured, reasoned, and balanced plan. They have not gone whole hog in the other direction. They have proposed a variety of ridings that accurately represent the vast diversity that is Saskatchewan's reality. Instead of having a map that is artificially stacked 14 to nothing against any distinctive urban representation whatsoever, the majority proposed a realistic blend of six predominantly rural ridings, one more than exists today, five urban ridings—three in Saskatoon and two in Regina, instead of none today—and three largely mixed ridings. It is I think a fair balance. This configuration will allow both rural and urban voices to be reflected in the House of Commons without one swamping the other, without communities of common interest being compromised or obscured.

In other provinces, I note that other MPs from other parties, including the government, have underlined the importance of this same principle. I think of Mr. Calkins from Wetaskiwin as one example.

The key point here is reflected actually in the structure of Saskatchewan's municipal organizations. There are two of them, not just one. One is distinctively rural and the other is urban. Why? Because the interests they represent are different and each deserves focused, full-time attention. They are both important. They need to work well together. But each has a distinctive voice that must be heard in its own right. It's fundamental to fairness in our democracy. That's why I disagree with the dissent and I strongly support the majority report of the Saskatchewan commission.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

•(1105)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Goodale.

Mr. Komarnicki, it's great to have you here today. You have five minutes.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

I have filed two written reports, one on March 18, 2013, and one previous to that.

Starting with the March 18 report, I want to draw some things to the committee's attention. First of all, Saskatchewan did increase its population to the tune of 54,448. If you divide that into 14 ridings, that's 3,889 people per riding. That's not a significant increase in population, and it certainly wouldn't justify a fundamental shift of what has been the history in Saskatchewan.

I want to talk a little about the history of Saskatchewan. For the most part, except for the period 1933-1965, we've had a mixed urban-rural riding. In 1965, when that mix was settled, there were then 13 ridings, and when the committee did the quotient, it was 71,168 people, a mere difference of 2,645 persons from the present quotient. When you multiply that by 13 ridings, it's a difference of 37,000. An addition of 37,000 people, or 50,000 people, does not justify a fundamental shift in how Saskatchewan is being represented.

When we look at how the commission arrived at the fundamental change, I would suggest to this committee that they were predisposed to creating urban-only ridings, as evidenced by the fact that they said the initial communications confirmed their initial thoughts that there should be urban-only ridings. Then they were not prepared to change, notwithstanding all the subsequent representations that were made essentially to keep that the same.

If you look at their report, they said the majority of the subsequent representations, after they had made up their mind as to how this would work, were opposed to changing that urban-rural mix. Yet they chose not to accept that. Why? I say because they were of the view, as they said, that the time had come to change what we'd been doing and to switch to urban-only ridings.

But what is that based on? Is that based on a population increase of 30,000? When we look at the quotients throughout Canada we find that most quotients vary to a significant degree between the provinces. We look at Alberta, the number of people in their constituencies, 107,000; Ontario, 106,000; I think it's 35,000 in P.E. I. So there's a wide range of switching. If the committee were going to do something with that small increase in population, I would suggest they could have done it by what I would call tinkering with boundaries, adding some here, taking some there, but not making a fundamental shift.

When we look at the history of Saskatchewan, we find that except for that period of 1933-1965, it's been an urban-rural mix. That's what Saskatchewan is about. That's what makes Saskatchewan unique. It hasn't got a great population, and Regina-Saskatoon is not Montreal, Vancouver, or Toronto; they can be well represented.

So when we look at the numbers—and I filed that on March 18—we see that the commission had a submission made initially by a number of political science professors from Regina and Saskatoon, who suggested that in that period of time there was a precedent for urban-only ridings. But I draw your attention to the fact that in those years, in that chart, Saskatoon had a rural portion ranging from roughly 3,000 to 4,500, and Regina itself, in 1951-52, had a population of 5,241 that moved into a rural-only riding.

What's interesting in that period is that Souris—Moose Mountain effectively had two members of Parliament, as opposed to the area I now represent. It takes me three hours to get to the northeast corner of my riding and two and a half hours to get to the southwest corner, and it takes my learned colleague here 20 minutes to cross Wascana. The issues that face Wascana or Regina and the issues that face Souris—Moose Mountain are similar. We have cities, we have housing shortages, we have newcomers that we need to deal with, we have policing issues, we have oil and gas exploration, potash, carbon capture and sequestration, and enhanced oil recovery—all the issues that might exist in Wascana and more.

• (1110)

What I'm saying, Mr. Chair, is that the time has not come in Saskatchewan to fundamentally change what has been happening. It's not there. The commission was dead wrong. We should not accept that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Anderson, you're next, please, for five minutes.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm proud to be here today representing the good folks of Cypress Hills—Grasslands, which is a huge rural area with a low population. We've got about 40,000 square miles of territory in our area, with approximately just fewer than 70,000 people, and I have one city in my riding.

I had the realization that my riding was going to expand a bit, and it has a bit of expansion up in the northwest corner. You can see on the map that there's a line in the northwest. I'm fine with that. I understand the necessity to try to deal with the equality of population; something needed to happen along those lines. I think Mr. Ritz and I have agreed that this is an acceptable way to do that. Actually, I made these suggestions in front of the commission, so in terms of the micro part of the equation here today, I would support what's happening in my riding.

But I have a bigger concern, and that is at the macro level, at the provincial level. We are moving from what is commonly known as a hub-and-spoke system, a combination of rural and urban ridings, to a system that has some strictly urban ridings and then the other ridings would be a mix of rural and urban. I think I've got less of a vested interest, actually, in the changes that are taking place kind of generally around the cities than many of the other MPs, because they don't affect me directly, except in terms of how I see representation being affected over the next few years if the changes go ahead. I want to talk to that for a few minutes.

There is no compelling reason for change. We've had 45 years of a system in place that's worked well. It's been fine-tuned. Actually, I would suggest it's unlikely that anyone could come up with a worse suggestion than what we have right now in terms of the proposal. One of the commissioners said at one point in his comments that we can't have two losers; you have to have a winner and a loser. I would suggest here that we actually do have two losers: both urban and rural lose in this.

I'll go through some of the reasons. One, I believe the proposed changes negatively impact representation in all areas, both urban and rural. History has shown that all three parties actually have done well under this system in the past at various times; there's been strength from all three parties. Right now, obviously, our party has political strength in the province. One of the reasons I think it's worked well is that MPs have had to understand both rural and urban issues in each of the areas and the constituencies they represented. They've been able to represent those issues as a group. I think this has worked particularly well for us over the last few years.

Our economy is still primarily rural based. When you look at the drivers to the economy, it's things like agriculture, mining, oil and gas. Those are rural based; that's where the operations take place, but typically they are managed from the cities. So there is a strong connection, and there continues to be that strong connection, between rural and urban in so many ways. It's frustrating to see a change that would actually enlarge rural ridings. As you bring the focus into just urban ridings, the populations are denser there and it obliges larger rural ridings, but then it reduces representation in the city as well.

The question I really have is this. Why are we doing this deliberately? Why are we creating this divide?

The impact of the present proposal expands rural ridings and creates some very bizarre communities of interest. If you look at Saskatoon, acreage is being tied into the Regina global transportation hub, and it makes no sense at all. It has broken up the Moose Jaw-Regina development corridor there. It does not make good sense, and it reduces city representation from four to three in both major cities.

These changes that are proposed were opposed by 75% at the presentations, and that included members of the urban municipality organizations, which had not been consulted prior to SUMA announcing its position on this. The mayors of Saskatoon and Regina presently have come out against it, and former mayors oppose it. The mayor of Swift Current, in my riding, has opposed it. We have former city councillors who oppose it. The Regina chamber of commerce came out against it, and we have numerous RMs, rural municipalities, that have opposed this.

I'd like to address why I think this has perhaps happened. I think there's been a misunderstanding about the role of MPs by commissioners. There's a failure to understand Saskatchewan communities of interest and what they really represent, and I actually think the commissioners got bad advice from a small group of people early in the process who have presented themselves as experts in this. I'd certainly love to address this a little bit later, and some of the misconceptions they have about Saskatchewan.

It's unfortunate that two members of the commission seem to have embraced the proposal and skilfully ignored the vast number of presentations. Mr. Marit's dissenting report is insightful. It's unprecedented. It's important that we look at that. We will likely be changing back, I would suggest, to the type of system we've had in the past, perhaps 10 years from now.

Hopefully, Mr. Chair, the commission can give Saskatchewan voters their voices back.

We look forward to your report.

●(1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Anderson.

Minister Ritz, it's good to have you here today. You have five minutes.

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Battlefords—Lloydminster): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I certainly welcome the points made by my colleagues at this end of the table. I certainly welcome the dissenting report by one of the commissioners, David Marit, who heads up the SARM, the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities.

Mr. Goodale said that SUMA is very supportive, but that's not necessarily true. A good portion of the delegates to SUMA represent small towns and villages throughout my area, and they're certainly not in favour of this.

The biggest concern that I have, and that a lot of my colleagues in Saskatchewan have, is growing voter apathy. Mr. Anderson made the point that we will soon be changing back again to a hub-and-spoke method, because of the growing population base in Saskatchewan as a whole. The province has finally come of age.

Saskatoon and Regina are the first and second fastest growing cities in Canada, with the youngest demographics. We're in this for the long haul. So I welcome the dissenting report that reflects and builds on the 75% of applications before the commission that were in favour of the status quo, with some changes here and there to reflect today's growth.

What they didn't take into consideration at all were trade corridors, communities of interest. A lot of community satellites around Saskatoon and Regina are served by the city's water, sewer, and gas systems, and they don't reflect those trade corridors or those centres of interest at all.

I'm very concerned about voter apathy as we constantly change where people should go to vote. Serviceability of a riding is extremely important. Any one of us who represent large rural areas knows this. As my colleague from Souris—Moose Mountain said, his riding is roughly six hours across, point to point. Mine is similar in scope. Cross it with a few rivers that aren't accessible all year round and you have some serviceability problems.

People want to see their MP. I made this point at the commission, and Justice Mills said to just use Skype. Well, these are private issues in a lot of cases. People want to see you face to face, get to know their MP. I don't for a minute believe there are issues pertinent to the rural areas that aren't pertinent in the urban areas, or vice versa. I think there's a good cross-section of work that needs to be done. In my time here in the House I've found that the more knowledge you have of issues across the spectrum, the more important it is when it comes to votes in the House, because votes and the work that you do here are not divided on rural-urban lines. Not at all. I'm not sure why we do that to the voters.

I've never in my 16 years heard a complaint from anyone saying they're not being represented because they're rural or they're urban. I've never heard that. I think there are a lot of issues that are germane to this. From the Saskatchewan caucus perspective, we work as a team. We meet at least once a week, and more often than that if there are issues that we need to discuss to build a consensus on how we approach an issue, regardless of where it terminates or begins.

The problem we have with this new map is beyond the serviceability of the ridings. Once you isolate those urban ridings, you create a patchwork quilt to make the rest of it work. You can see how difficult it's going to be for people to identify with their MP when their community of interest has nothing to do with where the MP is based or where the office has to be. In some of them, the office will actually have to be outside the riding to give the best service. That's just untenable in today's society.

So I think a lot of things were completely missed. I know you have in front of you some letters from three city councillors in Saskatchewan. I had a discussion with the mayor of Saskatoon the other day. These letters are under the City of Saskatoon letterhead, but they're not authentic in that regard. One of them is a relative of a candidate, one is a campaign worker for a candidate, and the other one's a failed candidate. So take them from where they came.

I have a quote here from Mayor Don Atchison from Saskatoon:

It is my strong belief that the divisive plan before you now pits urban against rural, city against town and ultimately damages the relationships we have been nurturing. I believe in consensus and building on mutual trust. This plan promotes neither.

That's, in a nutshell, exactly what we're talking about here. We're hopeful that the commission will go back to the drawing board, take the 75% of applications that were made to heart, and leave us with the status quo as the basis for some tweaking here and there to give the voters of Saskatchewan what they need.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You're all very much right on time today. Great.

We'll start with our line of questioning.

Mr. Armstrong, you're going first.

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm going to start with Mr. Anderson. I was intrigued by a lot of your testimony. One of the things you said was there was no compelling reason for change. If there was no compelling reason for change, why do you think the commission made such a radical change in the status quo?

You mentioned there was a small group that got to them early, and after that, 75% of the presentations and representations in the public sessions were in opposition to these changes, but that for some reason the commission turned a deaf ear to this 75%. Can you expand on the history and the small group and how this radical change was pushed in the first place?

Mr. David Anderson: Absolutely.

There was a group of political scientists who got together and made a proposal early in the process, and they made some representation. It was interesting that later there was an article in the *Kindersley West Central Crossroads* newspaper, where one of the spokesmen for them basically said that, give or take a few adjustments, the boundaries have essentially been drawn up close to the suggestions we made. They made the suggestions early in the process. It didn't seem to matter what the discussion was, the commission locked in on those, and it has basically not changed its position since then. They did adjust a few boundaries after that, but they did not deal with the structure, the systems they had put in place.

I just find it interesting, because a comment from the spokesman of this group shows they really don't understand what's going on outside of the city they're involved in. He talks about my riding and says:

Also I think—and also Cypress Hills—Grassland is a big riding, and I haven't heard any—in the past since it's been in existence, any complaints about lack of representation..

—which I appreciate, of course—

...so you could easily grow some of the rural ridings not quite as big as Cypress Hills—Grasslands but somewhat as big as Cypress Hills—Grasslands and not have a problem with geographical manageability.

Anybody who lives in a riding similar to ours understands that this person clearly does not have any idea of what he's talking about. I made my presentation. At the end of my presentation to them, I said, if you came into my riding today and we were to drive to the four corners to hold our meetings, you would get back to the same point 24 hours and over 1,000 kilometres later—just to get back to the point where you came in. Clearly, working out of the city, they don't have an understanding of a rural riding.

Secondly, they did make the point that "...in terms of information technology, it's easier than ever for rural MPs to connect with their constituents...." That's true on one level, but on the other level we're being told, as Mr. Ritz pointed out, that Skype should work for us in a rural riding. The reality is that it is not practical. I had a young lady who made a presentation in our area, and when Judge Mills asked her how she wanted to see her MP, her answer was: "I want an appointment. When I come to see my MP, I want an appointment. I don't want an e-mail. I don't want a phone call. I don't want to Skype."

It was interesting. He referenced immigration as an urban issue, and he clearly did not understand the reality of what's happening in rural Saskatchewan. I looked at his testimony. I was astounded by that, because presently immigration is the biggest file in my riding, which would surprise many people. It's a commonality between urban and rural areas.

They also said that there are no "similar communities of interest" around the two cities. His comment was, "Saskatchewan now is a rural and an urban province." That, again, clearly demonstrates a failure to understand what's going on around Regina, with the Global Transportation Hub, and with the incredible growth that's taking place in the communities that are developing around Saskatoon. I guess I come back to the fact that we still have an economy where the rural areas are tied to the city areas, the urban areas, and those communities of interest exist.

Judge Mills said at one point that the communities of interest were the second most critical factor they were considering, but they seemed to have completely moved away from that and abandoned the idea.

If you take a look at the map, for example, Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan goes from south of Moose Jaw up to just south of Humboldt. So you've got things going on between Moose Jaw and Regina, and the MP is going to have to represent Dundurn, which is right up by Humboldt.

If you look at Humboldt—Warman—Martensville—Rosetown, Rosetown and Humboldt are in the same riding. The MP is going to have to go through one or two or three other ridings just to get to the other side of his own riding in order to cut that distance off.

I'm willing to represent a large rural riding. I think it's just crazy that we set a process in place that makes other ridings have to expand to come to those kinds of sizes as well.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: I'll be quick.

In regard to the Skype comment by the judge, I wonder if that same judge would agree to host trials by Skype, to hear testimony. I don't think any judge across this country would agree to that, because there's a different interaction when you're face to face with a constituent, when you're face to face with a lawyer as a judge.

Could you expand on the role of an MP, particularly in the rural areas, when they have to go and meet people face to face? What's the difference between social media and actual face-to-face contact?

• (1125)

The Chair: I think we'll get that answer in an answer to one of our other colleagues. He's gone over time.

I know that Mr. Cullen will ask you the same question, so you can give the answer.

Mr. Cullen, five minutes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): I like your optimism, Chair.

I've got a lot of questions, so I'll try to keep my questions short, and I'll ask the members here to keep their answers similarly short.

Mr. Goodale, I have a question about this 75% number that's been thrown around today and in various press reports. I'm going to read from Commissioner Mills, and this is a quote: "I have no idea what the 75 per cent number is, that's not a number the commission generated."

This 75% number that has been rolled out by your colleagues, do you have any comment on that?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I gather it was a number used by Mr. Marit in his dissenting opinion. There's no precise indication of exactly how it was calculated.

Judge Mills was asked by the media where it came from, because he's of course the keeper of the documents and all the representations, records, and so forth. He provided the quote you just read into the record. In the same article he goes on to say that the calculation

must have been based on including some of the representations that were received, but not all of the representations that were received, including a number of form letters that were submitted without briefs.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Let me ask you this. Are there any urban representations, any urban members of the provincial legislation who are entirely urban?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Oh, yes. Most of the members in both Regina and Saskatoon are entirely urban. Provincially, you mean—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I mean provincially. Excuse me.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: —in the Saskatchewan legislature?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes. Does that offend their values?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: There are one or two on the fringes of the two cities that include kind of the doughnut effect, if you will, around the city. But there would be 10 or 11 in both cities that are exclusively urban.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Does that offend the values of Saskatchewanites?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: No.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay.

I'm going to read a quote to you, Mr. Anderson:

Think of the responsibilities that rural MPs have. They're different from...urban folks, in that when the urban MPs want to meet with their municipal council, they have one council, which is often shared by several MPs.

Would you agree with that quote? When you think of the responsibilities a rural MP has, they're different from those of urban folks?

Mr. David Anderson: I don't know if you're quoting from Mr. Tynning's presentation in Swift Current. You may be. He made an excellent observation, that urban MPs typically have to deal with one city council, one school board, and one health division. He was talking about the fact that in my riding I have to deal with 40 towns, 60 RMs, two or three health agencies, and two or three school boards. He was pointing out that there is a very different requirement in rural areas than there is in urban areas in terms of how many governments you have to deal with.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: So you essentially agree with it.

Mr. David Anderson: But it doesn't separate the notion that those communities of interest are still tied together, because, for example, the health districts in my area go right through Swift Current, Saskatchewan, into the rural area. So both urban and rural are involved.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Here's another quote for you.

The first one was from your colleague, Mr. Warkentin, by the way.

This one is from Mr. Calkins:

Many constituents and municipal leaders feel that the hybrid model

—the so-called hub and spoke—

will not allow the interests and identities of the riding to be clearly communicated at the federal level.

Do you disagree with that?

Mr. David Anderson: In my riding, the mayor for the city of Swift Current came and said clearly that he did not agree with the proposals that were being made by the boundary commission in Saskatchewan.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I want to know why that is.

Mr. David Anderson: I would suggest that Saskatchewan and Alberta are two different beasts. Clearly we've had a different history. All three parties have actually had success under that history. There's no compelling reason to make a change—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Can I ask you about what you just said, that all three parties have done well? I'm trying to think back to the testimony we've heard from any of the MPs so far. No one has raised the idea of how this manifests itself politically to this point. I've read a number of the comments from Saskatchewan MPs talking about the electoral implications.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): I have a point of order.

Mr. David Anderson: No, I'd like to answer that, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We have a point of order from Mr. Reid, and then I'll get back to you, Mr. Anderson

Mr. Scott Reid: I think Mr. Anderson's point was that all three parties have done well in representing their constituents under this system.

The Chair: We'll let Mr. Anderson answer that. He wanted to answer the question.

Go ahead, Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: There was some notion in some of the testimony that we needed to change the boundaries in order for some other political parties to do well. In fact, I can read you a quote here:

At the moment, it's 14 to nothing, which seems a bit one-sided and unfair and unrealistic.

That was quoted by CBC this morning. It's a quote by Mr. Goodale.

• (1130)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: The commissioner rejected that. It said—I'm going to quote here:

...a large number of contacts were inspired by the encouragement of members of Parliament opposed to the abolition of rural-urban hybrid districts. Representatives of political parties whose candidates had not been elected supported the proposal, presumably in the belief that the changes would enhance their political fortunes.

The commission rejected both sides. Would you say that's proper?

Mr. David Anderson: To reject both sides of—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes. If there's political interest either by those who are elected or by those who want to be elected, based on their particular perspective of the maps and on how parties are going to fare, that shouldn't factor into the commission's deliberations. Is that fair?

Mr. David Anderson: I hope that would be the case. In this case, I'm not sure that's happened.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Komarnicki, I want to read something you said in your testimony today:

...the commission...were predisposed to creating urban-only ridings.

Are you suggesting they came in to this deliberation with an inherent bias?

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I'd say they did.

We had the political scientists from Regina and Saskatoon indicate that they needed to take the fact of urban-only ridings into consideration. The time had come for that, and they suggested why they took that position. The commission said it reaffirmed their initial thoughts. They said those submissions were something they relied on.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I want to conclude with this point, that in the end they said the majority of the people they heard after that were opposed to the urban-rural mix, and they chose to reject it. You would think they would take into account the position of the people of Saskatchewan and the presenters who presented in person. They said that notwithstanding that the majority was opposed to the change, they didn't accept it. Why?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It's amazing what a robocall can accomplish.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Robocalls had nothing to do with it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dion.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The argument we hear today is extraordinary, that it would be against the political culture of one of our provinces to create urban ridings. Everywhere else we have heard colleagues in this committee telling us the commission wants to merge their rural region with a city, and they object. I read in the *Leader-Post* that we don't see Thunder Bay divided four ways so that northern Ontario ridings are made smaller. It does not exist elsewhere.

So the claim that it would be against the political culture of Saskatchewan makes Saskatchewan the distinct society of electoral boundaries.

I have some familiarity, Mr. Chair, with this argument of distinct society, that we are so distinct from the rest of the country that we need to do things completely differently. I have challenged that in my province. I would like to briefly challenge that here and ask if Saskatchewan is really so distinct on the rural-urban issue.

I'm puzzled by the number of people from Saskatchewan who support the recommendation of Professor Courtney and Justice Mills. As a political scientist I have a strong regard for Professor Courtney, as do all political scientists in Canada. By the way, it's not only the political scientists of Regina and Saskatoon who said these recommendations make sense. I have here a letter from Charlie Clark, a city councillor from Saskatoon, who supports these recommendations. The Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association supports this recommendation. I understand not all their members do, but the association does, and they have compelling arguments to make that point.

I have an editorial from *The StarPhoenix* dismissing the claim that 75% of the submissions were in favour of the current urban-rural split as largely, and I quote them—it's not me, it's *The StarPhoenix*—because of “pre-formatted postcards distributed to supporters by Conservative MPs”. This is what is said in your province, in an editorial in the *Leader Post* supporting the recommendations, and so on.

Mr. Goodale, how strong is the support for the status quo in your distinct and lovely province?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Obviously there are differences of opinion when anything touches on a political topic in Saskatchewan. That's just the nature of the beast.

The Chair: It's not just Saskatchewan.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: You mean that happens outside Saskatchewan too? My Lord.

People are on different sides of the equation, Mr. Dion, wanting to avoid partisanship as much as possible. The city councils of Regina and Saskatoon have both declined to take official positions. Some individual members of council have taken positions. In Saskatoon, for example, Mayor Atchison and Councillor Donauer opposed the new map, but seven councillors, at least—Clark, Hill, Iwanchuk, Jeffries, Loewen, Lorje, and Paulsen—support the new map.

In Regina the new mayor and council are officially neutral. Privately, several councillors and former councillors are supportive of the new map: Councillor Burnett and others on the current council, former Councillors Browne and Clipsham on the previous council.

In Prince Albert, current councillor and former mayor, Don Cody is supportive.

In Moose Jaw, Councillor Mitchell is supportive.

In the north, Chief Tammy Cook-Searson and the entire council of the Lac La Ronge First Nation, which is a very large first nation in northern Saskatchewan, are supportive.

Bob Hale in Swift Current and the editorial boards of both the Saskatoon *StarPhoenix* and the Regina *Leader-Post* have indicated their support, as have the majority of the political science departments of both the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina.

Then, of course, SUMA—as you point out, the Saskatchewan Urban Municipal Association represents a broad cross-section of opinion, and they submitted a very strong brief to the boundaries commission that was quoted at length in the commission.

SUMA represents communities in which about 75% to 80% of Saskatchewan people live, and they obviously hold a strong view with respect to the validity and the importance of the new map.

• (1135)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Thank you very much.

Maybe some of my other colleagues might react to that.

The Chair: Yes, in the 15 seconds that are left.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Well, 15 seconds doesn't allow much, except to say that when you look at the population of Saskatchewan

and the history of Saskatchewan, there's nothing in the change of population that would demand or indicate a fundamental change of the nature that the professors were talking about. It was something they wanted to try out in Saskatchewan, and Saskatchewan's not ready for that. You could increase the population of Regina with the four present members significantly before you have an urban-only riding.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Minister Ritz, I think my colleague was asking about Skype, and the difference between Skype and face-to-face conversation is obviously tremendously different. I wonder if you'd elaborate a little bit on his question.

In many rural parts of Canada, high-speed Internet is not readily available. I'm wondering if you have any idea of whether or not Skype is very practical in many parts of rural Saskatchewan.

Hon. Gerry Ritz: As practical as it may be, it still comes down to a privacy issue when you're discussing those types of things with a constituent. You would well know how many people want a face-to-face appointment. I know there aren't too many weeks that go by that I don't spend as much time as I can in the riding, and it's difficult as a minister. Having said that, when I do, I have face-to-face meetings. I do some work by phone, and I do some work by e-mail from here, to scope out what it is they want to discuss, but at the end of the day they still want that face-to-face meeting in order to make their points and to move forward on the issues.

Skype is certainly an option. At times, if you're speaking to a group.... I'll use it if I can't get back to a chamber meeting, just to make sure my presence is there, but it is still logistically problematic in most areas. Even in areas that have high-speed, it's still problematic, with weather interference and different things like that. You've got that time delay, and it's not as usable as it could possibly be.

I felt it was an offhand remark that really missed the whole idea of serviceability in a riding. Your presence has to be felt. We have to be seen doing our job day-to-day on the ground, and Skype just doesn't get that done. So it was just an offhand comment by Justice Mills that I thought really proved the point that he didn't understand the nature of face to face. Mr. Armstrong made the point of asking if he would run a court case that way. No, legally that would just be untenable.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Mr. Komarnicki, earlier in your testimony you mentioned the history, and I'm wondering if you could just give us an overview of that again. I think you're making the point, certainly to me, that we haven't seen any reason for the big change. There is not a huge population explosion taking place in Saskatchewan. There's no obvious reason it would demand the big change that is being advised by two members but not by the third. I wonder if you could just give us a bit of the history again. I think you went back to 1933.

●(1140)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: In fact, even before 1933, up to 1933, there was an urban-rural mix. It's just the nature of Saskatchewan. In 1965 they set it out more predominantly, and it's been the case every year thereafter.

With four urban-rural ridings in Regina, let's say, with the provincial quotient at 73,813, multiply that by four and you get 295,000. If you did nothing, just at the provincial quotient, Regina could grow to a population of 295,000 before you would have an urban-only riding, if you went with history.

Right now Regina has a population of 193,000. If you did the 15%, which could go up or down, and I suggest that in this case in Saskatchewan it would be an appropriate thing to do, Regina would have to grow to 369,000 people before you'd need a change. Now, that's not the fact.... The population numbers don't justify a fundamental shift, because if you kept the four urban-rural mixes in Regina, you could go for quite a number of years.

To say that Regina and Saskatoon are growing.... In fact, we have cities in Souris—Moose Mountain, in my riding, that are growing at the rate of 9% and 11% or so more than Regina or Saskatoon, because of the oil and gas industry and because of the explosion of the economy in Saskatchewan. Actually, the southeast in the last five years has surpassed the percentage growth in Regina and Saskatoon. I would dare say that in the next five years the population will increase similarly by 5,000 people.

So what are these commissioners doing by saying that the time has come in Saskatchewan to make a fundamental change? The time has not come in Saskatchewan to make a fundamental change. It may, but Regina and Saskatoon would have to grow a significant degree before we'd have to say we need urban-only ridings. You could always split it once again. They're small cities; they're not large cities.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have about 20 seconds left, if you'd like to pontificate.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Mr. Anderson, I wonder if you would comment on the availability of Skype in your riding.

Mr. David Anderson: If you take a look at my riding...obviously, it's a large rural area. We do not have high-speed Internet access across the complete riding. We have some coverage there, but this is an issue. We can provide e-mails and those kinds of things. You can obviously do that with most people, but in terms of setting up anything realistic for Skype in that riding, it's not practical. It just shows that people don't understand what they're talking about when they make those kinds of suggestions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I have Mr. Cullen and Mr. Scott sharing, I think.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes.

Just very briefly, Minister Ritz, you said earlier that Saskatoon and Regina are the two fastest growing urban populations in the country. Is that right?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: That's according to a StatsCan report, with the youngest demographics on top of that.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: In terms of Mr. Komarnicki's "time has come" question and the growth of those urban interests, one of the predominant factors for the commission is looking at communities of interest.

Mr. Goodale, I'm confused with the idea that somebody working 500 acres has exactly the same community of interest as somebody living in a 700-square-foot loft in Regina, that their interests are the same, and that their representation is so complete under this unique model in Saskatchewan that it applies nowhere else in the country.

Is a community of interest satisfied by the idea of keeping the status quo?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I don't think so, Mr. Cullen, and there were many people who made representations before the commission who didn't think so as well.

Obviously, in a province like Saskatchewan, from one end to the other, we have a lot in common. We have a lot of community patriotism. We feel very strongly about our province—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You're talking about the Roughriders explicitly, right?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: And we celebrate it. We fight against daylight savings time and all of those things.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Yes, you have, successfully.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: There's a real instinct in Saskatchewan about our province. It's a province of great variety, of great diversity. The mixing together of all manner of communities in the way the existing map does tends to obscure that diversity. It muffles the voices. It makes it more difficult for some people to make themselves heard and to see themselves reflected in their parliament. That's an important issue, and the commission talked about that. If people chronically feel that somehow they are prevented from seeing themselves reflected in their parliament, then they begin to drop out of the political process. I think that's bad for democracy.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Scott, you have three minutes.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Great. Thank you.

Mr. Anderson, having heard from Mr. Komarnicki that he feels there was a predisposition on the part of the commission to create urban ridings, and he reiterated that just now, you used a couple of turns of phrase. I'm wondering if you want to stand by them or reconsider them.

He basically said that the commission "skilfully avoided the vast majority of the presentations". After, Mr. Cullen asked you whether you agreed or not—

●(1145)

Mr. Scott Reid: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I just want to be clear. Is it "He basically said", or are you actually quoting?

Mr. Craig Scott: I'm quoting. It's a quote.

Mr. Scott Reid: You are quoting, so you basically say, "He exactly said".

Mr. Craig Scott: Perhaps you could add the time on, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I've stopped the clock. We'll go forward.

Mr. Scott Reid: I appreciate that. I just want to make sure that you report things accurately. That's important.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Scott.

Mr. Craig Scott: It's an exact quote—"skilfully avoided the vast majority of the presentations".

In response to Mr. Cullen on how political parties would fare, you agreed it should not matter, but then you said, "In this case, I'm not sure that was the case."

Are you standing by those two comments?

Mr. David Anderson: Chair, as Mr. Komarnicki already read to you, the commission itself, in their report, wrote that:

A majority of those who appeared at the public hearings opposed the proposal. Their principal focus was on maintaining rural-urban hybrid districts and on speaking against the creation of exclusively urban ridings for Saskatoon and Regina. A significant minority of those appearing at the public hearings supported the Commission's proposal.

There's an acknowledgment right there that they had not listened to the majority of the presentations they heard.

In response to your other one, I'll just read out what I read as a quote:

At the moment, it's 14 to nothing, which seems a bit one-sided and unfair and unrealistic.

That's a quote from this morning from Mr. Goodale. I think we heard—and perhaps this is his opinion because he's not successful politically in the province—that we need to make these changes. We don't agree with that. We think this system has been good for people. All three parties over the years have obviously benefited from this system without having to change it. Certainly, the people of Saskatchewan are capable of picking the people they choose and the parties they choose. They don't need to have a major change here in order to change that.

Mr. Craig Scott: Thank you, Mr. Anderson.

I hear your answer as confirming that you believe the commission was biased.

Do you know that the chair of the commission is a Superior Court justice appointed by the Chief Justice of Saskatchewan? Yes or no.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Chair, I never said the commission was biased. I think we need to make sure that's in the record here. If Mr. Scott wants to assume those kinds of things, he can.

The Chair: You just put it there.

Mr. Craig Scott: That's fine. I'm telling you how I interpret what you've said.

The Chair: Do not speak across the table, folks.

Go ahead, Mr. Scott.

Mr. Craig Scott: Are you aware that Mr. Mills is the Superior Court justice appointed by the Chief Justice of Saskatchewan?

Mr. David Anderson: He was.

Mr. Craig Scott: Are you aware that Professor Courtney was appointed by the Speaker, who happens also to be an MP from Saskatchewan—

Mr. David Anderson: I am.

Mr. Craig Scott: —and is a well-respected political scientist with knowledge in this field?

Mr. David Anderson: All of these things?

Mr. Craig Scott: Yes.

Mr. David Anderson: Well, he was appointed by the Speaker.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. So I understand you to say he's not well respected. Thank you very much.

Mr. David Anderson: I never said that.

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Goodale, do you have anything to add?

The Chair: The time is up.

Go ahead, Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: It would be nice if, for future reference on future witnesses, Mr. Scott would not put words into the mouths of witnesses who weren't actually there. He has a mania for precision, and we should have the same respect from him.

The Chair: I'm sure you're not on a point of order, but the chair will ask all of you to do exactly that, so that witnesses are able to answer questions on their own without you telling them what their answer might be.

I have Mr. Menegakis next.

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our colleagues for appearing before us today.

It certainly is a unique situation: a province with 1,033,000 people and growing; 14 ridings; 75% of the presenters felt differently from what the commission ultimately came up with; and 13 out of the 14 MPs representing Saskatchewan are in agreement with the 75% of the presenters. It's not the first time, obviously, that this issue has come up, this urban-rural riding.

Minister, I'd like to start with you, because of your 16 years of involvement in the political process at the federal level. Is this something that's come up in the past? Was this discussed in the last redistribution process? Can you give us a little of your feedback on that?

Hon. Gerry Ritz: There has not been a redistribution to this extent, sir. As StatsCan does its census, there are always changes made to riding boundaries in a given province. This time around, it's a little different because we're adding some 30 seats across Canada. So there's a different factor in Alberta, with larger cities there: Calgary with roughly one million, and Edmonton with roughly 600,000. So there are distinctly urban seats in that regard.

As Mr. Komarnicki was talking about the breakdown of Regina and the potential growth and so on...we see the hybrid model we have now working extremely well. As I said in my opening remarks, in 16 years I've never heard a complaint from anyone saying they're not being represented properly because they're urban or rural. We just don't hear that.

A good cross-section of knowledge on issues is certainly something that we accept here as we work through issues in the House of Commons and as we vote on issues.

● (1150)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: With all due respect to the credentials of the three members of the commission in Saskatchewan, I find the comment on Skype to be way out there. Skype implies that every house in Saskatchewan has a computer, that every resident in those houses, every constituent, has the ability to use that computer and communicate with it and has the skill set to do so, and that the bandwidth is there for easy communications back and forth.

I'd like to direct my question to you, Mr. Anderson. You may have touched on this before. How easy would it be in such a vast rural area for people to communicate with you, as their member of Parliament, using Skype?

Mr. David Anderson: Well, it's basically impossible. First, we don't have the resources across the entire riding. Second, I don't have the staffing ability to handle that if the majority of our contact with people is going to be through Skype or whatever. It's impossible for us to deal with that with the kinds of budgets and staffing we've got. It's not realistic.

It may be used on some special occasions or whatever, but beyond that, people want to see us. They want to meet with us. Even looking at the size of the riding I've got there, I'm sure whoever's going to be in that riding is going to have to have two offices next time.

We've been able to manage with one, although the river goes through two-thirds of the way to the north there, and the northern folks have felt like they need better service as well. So whoever's there will need an office in Kindersley, I'm sure, and one in Swift Current in order to serve that community.

The Chair: You still have one minute and 30 seconds left.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Good.

Mr. Komarnicki, one of the points Mr. Marit made in his dissenting report is this:

There were many letters and public submissions from people concerned about being removed from their normal trading patterns or from their "community of interest". The mayor of the city of Humboldt, about an hour away from the city of Saskatoon, was very concerned that Humboldt was no longer part of a Saskatoon riding since it maintains a connection to that city.

Can you comment on that, please?

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Well, certainly when you look at the community of interest, I would say ask any mayor within my riding whether they want my riding to expand to be what in effect is taking Mr. Goodale's riding of Wascana into my riding. In fact, if you think about it, I get off the airplane in Regina and drive two hours to Estevan, only to drive two hours back to get into Wascana, and here is the community of Regina. It doesn't make sense.

When you look at Regina, it's sort of like a doughnut. If you took 50 or 100 kilometres around Regina, it would make sense for those to be there and have a bit of a mix of urban-rural, because that's where they trade and that's how the economy goes. In fact, when you look at the 1965 decision, they said something that would be a Saskatchewan compromise. They said what we did is held.... In the cities of Regina and Saskatoon...a majority of the population of the riding was urban and a lesser number were rural, to account for that. Therefore, they said that balance truly represents Saskatchewan and the community of interest, and it actually does. That's exactly the point.

Then when we look at the effect of changing from urban-rural to urban only, it by necessity drives the rural constituency larger, when you don't need to do that. In my case, it is remarkable that I'd have to make that extra trip and get an extra area near Regina when Mr. Goodale could service it so very easily.

The Chair: Thank you. That finishes our second round, and I really don't see time for a third round.

We'll thank our witnesses very much for coming today and for sharing their information with us.

We'll suspend for a moment while we change our panels.

● (1150)

_____ (Pause) _____

● (1155)

The Chair: Let's get going. We have one more panel to do today and also some committee business.

Most of you were present during the last panel, so you see what we're doing. There are five minutes each on presentation, and then we'll ask questions. We'll try to get a couple of rounds' worth of questions in.

Mr. Hoback, would you like to go first today?

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Thank you, Chair and fellow colleagues.

As a member of Parliament who represents the federal riding of Prince Albert in the House of Commons, to say that I was surprised that two of the three members of the Saskatchewan electoral boundaries commission would decide not to incorporate the blended rural-urban model of Saskatchewan communities into its report is an understatement.

Both the Saskatchewan electoral boundaries commissions of 2004 and 1994 agreed that the electoral ridings consisting of a blended rural-urban makeup centred around the province's urban centres best reflected the nature of Saskatchewan's communities. Yet surprisingly, two of three members of the current Saskatchewan electoral boundaries commission decided, in their report, that the rural-urban blend does work very well for those who reside in the riding of Prince Albert but does not work well within the greater Saskatoon or greater Regina areas.

My community, both urban and rural, has been and still possesses the city of Prince Albert as its hub. While the small urban and rural communities of Shellbrook, Melfort, Nipawin, and Tisdale possess their own unique traits and attractions, the centre of trade, commerce, health provision, sports, and entertainment will still remain in the city of Prince Albert. The city remains the hub of our community, as Saskatoon still remains the hub for smaller communities of Humboldt, Rosetown, Biggar, and Warman, and as Regina still remains the hub of the smaller communities of Moose Jaw, the Qu'Appelle Valley, and Lumsden.

Those in favour of the Saskatchewan boundary changes may argue that members of Parliament have the option of opening satellite constituency offices throughout their riding to better serve their constituents. This, I believe, is not in sync with the ongoing budgetary constraints that we as MPs have placed upon ourselves.

Others in support of the Saskatchewan boundary changes point to the fact that the wireless information age has made personal meetings with members of Parliament obsolete, as a webcam meeting is as effective as one face to face. This type of thinking is discriminatory towards Saskatchewan's large senior population, which still employs traditional methods and modes of communication.

Further, much of rural Saskatchewan still only receives the Internet via dial-up modem, which cannot facilitate the data transmission speed necessary for video conferencing.

One can therefore only conclude that the electoral boundary commission member, David Marit, was correct to conclude in his dissenting report to the commission that moving away from a blended rural-urban model of electoral representation in Saskatchewan is a mistake. To quote Mr. Marit:

Close to 75% of the letters and public submissions the commission received were opposed to the proposed boundary changes. The number of replies that the commission heard and read, to my understanding, was the highest in Canada per capita. That is a very powerful argument for leaving the electoral boundaries, as close as the commission can, in their current form in Saskatchewan.

While I will not comment on the specific changes that I believe are necessary to make other Saskatchewan electoral ridings more representative in nature, I have found two small oversights in the commission's report, which are related to the ability of the constituency services to be provided for two areas located just outside of my riding's proposed boundaries.

As indicated in the map I have attached in the prepared brief, population centres located in area 1 and area 2, as illustrated in map number 1—which I believe you have in your possession—should be incorporated into the riding of Prince Albert. The communities of Batoche, Domremy, and Saint Louis, along with their surrounding villages and farms, as illustrated in map 2, as well as the communities of Saint Brieux and Naicam, along with their surrounding villages and farms, as illustrated in map 3, are all considered part of the greater Prince Albert area.

My riding is where the residents of these communities work and shop. It is where they receive their health provisions; it is where they travel for entertainment, sports, and leisure. Dividing them electorally outside the Prince Albert riding simply does not make sense. Placing these communities into separate electoral ridings also

lessens the ability of their residents to receive proper constituency service.

As illustrated in map 2, the distance residents must travel to receive constituency service at the member of Parliament's office in the new riding of Humboldt—Warman—Martensville—Rosetown is far greater than the distance such residents would drive to receive the same service in the city of Prince Albert.

With the commission's proposed boundaries, residents in the village of Saint Louis, for example, will now have to drive an hour and a half, 128 kilometres, to the town of Humboldt to meet with their member of Parliament, yet the drive from Saint Louis to the city of Prince Albert, where my primary constituency office is, is only 33 kilometres. The drive takes only 27 minutes.

With reference to map 3, the situation is in fact worse, as residents in these communities cannot drive directly to their MP's office of Yorkton for three or four seasons of the year due to the nature of the roads, as the rural municipal roads, which residents must travel, are only safe and driveable during the summer months.

Under the commission's boundary proposal, the residents in the village of Saint Brieux will now have to drive 35 minutes north to the city of Melfort, in my constituency, change highways, and then turn around and drive south a staggering 295 kilometres, or three hours, to reach the member of Parliament's office in the city of Yorkton.

• (1200)

Option B means driving 55.5 kilometres or an hour and 19 minutes south to Muenster, within the new riding of Humboldt—Warman—Martensville—Rosetown, changing highways and driving southeast 228 kilometres, two hours and 31 minutes, back to Yorkton—Melville riding to reach the member of Parliament's office.

I already provide constituency services in the city of Melfort on the first Wednesday of every month for the residents of the city and the surrounding communities. As you can see, Saskatchewan isn't like Toronto, where population is the concern. In Saskatchewan, distance is the concern. How many kilometres should a constituent have to drive to meet with their member of Parliament, and what is a reasonable size of territory an MP can effectively represent on behalf of his or her constituents?

These changes proposed by the commission in effect create two kinds of MPs for Saskatchewan. One kind of MP, outside of Saskatoon and Regina, represents a vast amount of territory, incurs great travel expenses, has less face time with their constituents, and has to balance competing demands from municipal and provincial MLAs. The other kind of MP, located within the city of Saskatoon, has to deal with only one mayor or one council.

I therefore recommend that both committees of the commission take all these considerations into account and redraw the Prince Albert riding boundary to incorporate these communities in order to ensure that these residents receive constituency services without having to travel exorbitant distances to receive them. I believe moving the Prince Albert boundary line to include the rural municipality of St. Louis, number 431, and to include the northern two-thirds of the rural municipality of Lake Lenore—

The Chair: Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback: —will address the oversight in this commission.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Your chair nodded off a little there—not that what you were saying wasn't important. I went way over. I'm going to have to give the same extra time, if needed, to the others in as nice a way as possible. Don't take it.

Mr. Clarke, for five minutes.

• (1205)

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I don't mind sharing my time with my colleague.

I'm a little bit under the weather, so hopefully my voice will be able to be heard well.

Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to present to this committee on the Saskatchewan redistribution report. I'd like to let you know why I oppose the final report and why these changes go against the best interests of my constituents and mayors who are affected.

Taking population, geography, and communities of interest into account, the commission attempted to rejig the boundaries. David Marit, one of the commissioners, as well as the mayors of the affected areas believe the Saskatchewan boundary commission missed the mark. So before I explain the objections.... One-third of the commission and the vast majority of the public object to the proposed changes of the report.

I will begin by pointing out that Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River is almost two-thirds of the land mass of the province of Saskatchewan. In a riding with enormous travel challenges for any MP and the constituents, this plan has further disadvantaged some of the constituents by decreasing their access to representation. If you'll notice on the map I submitted, part of the riding in the southeast corner includes the towns of Shoal Lake, Red Earth, and Cumberland House. Because of the changes of the riding, I would have to travel through other ridings to reach these constituents. In addition, as a former councillor has pointed out to me, a company such as Cameco cannot access the northern development moneys for this area since it is not considered to be far enough north. These reserves and towns are not included in northern development planning. This just comes down to northern development. In fact, these have greater proximity and affinity with either Nipawin or Yorkton or Melville.

Not only has the final report diminished voter access, it has also left my riding well below the population criterion. My riding has an 11% deficit compared to Prince Albert. The proposed maps have the towns of Choiceland, Love, Smeaton, and White Fox removed from the riding and transferred to Prince Albert with no exchange—I have to point out—of population being made.

Here are the population facts. The combined population of Choiceland, Love, Smeaton, and White Fox is 991 people. The

riding population criterion is 73,813. In Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, under the new boundaries, the population now would be at 69,471, or 5.9% under the population criterion.

With the retention of the four towns of Choiceland, Smeaton, White Fox, and Love, the population would be at 70,462, or 95.5% of the population criterion—a small improvement in numbers, the 4.5%, under the population criterion.

What makes the least sense for the people of Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River is for their member of Parliament, or any other member who has to travel through the riding, having to access northern remote highways. By “remote” I mean roads that are either covered in snow and/or mud or are inaccessible during other times of the year.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to testify here today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Breitzkreuz.

Mr. Garry Breitzkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I really appreciate the opportunity to discuss with this committee my objections to the 2012 report of the federal electoral boundary commission for the province of Saskatchewan, particularly as it relates to my federal constituency of Yorkton—Melville. I represent a riding with a geographical area of 38,000 square kilometres and a population of about 67,000 people, approximately 51,000 of whom are eligible voters. The largest municipality in Yorkton—Melville, the city of Yorkton, is the third-largest shopping and service area in Saskatchewan, serving some 200,000 people living in east central Saskatchewan and western Manitoba.

Agriculture is the driving force in Saskatchewan's economy, and it is the economic backbone of my constituency. In 2011, real GDP in Saskatchewan's agriculture sector grew by 8.7%. This contributed to making Saskatchewan's economic growth the fastest in almost 15 years, according to the 2012 Statistics Canada report.

Yorkton—Melville is a good example of how the current hub-and-spoke system benefits both urban and rural communities. For example, the city of Yorkton serves as a hub for an otherwise largely rural agricultural region. It's a system based on interdependency and cooperation, a quality of life intertwined with the values and sensibilities of our rural regions, our cities, and our three levels of government. It has worked very well for decades. As an MP, I value the interdependency of those who work and live in the country in small communities and those who live and work in our cities. Our cities are closely connected to the surrounding rural areas and agricultural interests. We need each other, and we need to understand and advocate for what matters to all of us as a whole. That's my key point: creating distinctly urban and rural ridings in this province will undoubtedly diminish the strong voice that our agricultural sector currently enjoys. Creating 30 new seats in the House of Commons, most of which are urban, will further erode that voice.

When the head of an organization like the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities strongly disagrees with these proposed electoral boundary changes and a commission member publishes a dissenting report, I take notice. I had not heard of that previously happening in any commission.

Are you aware that nearly 75% of the public submissions and letters the commission received opposed the proposed boundary changes? I'm sure you have because I've heard it previously. That alone is a powerful reason to leave the electoral boundaries in their current form. But there's more. The changes proposed by the commission would have to be reversed in another decade to compensate for future variances from the population quota that would affect their representation and geographic size. In other words, Saskatchewan would end up going back to blended rural-urban constituencies.

I have a letter from Yorkton's mayor and council. All see the benefit of continuing the current hub-and-spoke model of rural and urban communities working together. They live it every day.

In conclusion, I ask the committee to respect the proposals outlined in the Saskatchewan commission's report. The urban-rural split of the electoral boundaries as proposed by the commission will negatively affect our agricultural voice. As Saskatchewan's economy continues to strengthen and our population continues to grow, I believe we should look at an increased move toward blended rural and urban constituencies. In Yorkton—Melville, both urban and rural communities work well together, as they do elsewhere in the province. The hub-and-spoke system continues to be an effective electoral model in our province, one that we should keep. As the old adage goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Mr. Chair, may I distribute the letter from Yorkton's mayor and council? I have it before me.

•(1210)

The Chair: It's your evidence, sir. There may be a translation issue.

Mr. Garry Breitzkreuz: No, I have it in both languages.

The Chair: Then by all means do so.

Mr. Garry Breitzkreuz: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Your time is up, so we will distribute the letter.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Can I ask the Elections Canada people to put up the maps so that we get the entire southern boundary of Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River? I have some questions, starting with Mr. Clarke, about the presentation he made.

You've put up a map based on the current boundaries, and we have to work from the proposed boundaries. You have three things marked down, and I just want to ask you about them. Number one, you say an entire area should be removed from your riding.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River. I live in Mississippi Mills, so I shouldn't complain about this.

Anyway, you have this area you're talking about, and separately you're saying this other area should be added back in, as it was taken

out. And there is a third area you're concerned about. Could you remind us very quickly what the populations are for each of those three areas going from east to west?

Mr. Rob Clarke: One of the great issues I have with the redistribution of the boundary drawings is that if you go into northern Saskatchewan, to Fond-du-Lac, just to drive down to Prince Albert it's over 14 hours. To transverse over to the eastern part of the province into Nipawin and over into Red Earth, Shoal Lake, and Cumberland House, you're adding about another additional four hours.

When you go into the southern portion... I remember being stationed up in Red Earth First Nation. Having to police that area was very difficult, because of the remoteness and the accessibility of meeting clients' needs. Having to drive into the southern portion of that riding...a lot of times, if that road was washed out or inaccessible, as an RCMP member I would have to drive around and go south through Prince Albert, in that jurisdiction there.

•(1215)

Mr. Scott Reid: Is this the part you're talking about here?

Mr. Rob Clarke: Correct.

Mr. Scott Reid: All right. Thank you.

I'd ask you one quick question to make sure. Your map shows the entire square area coloured in, but I notice that only part of it is.... You're saying it should all be removed, so in essence you're really saying this part here should be removed because this part already is removed. I just want to make sure I understand that.

Mr. Rob Clarke: After the commission's report...I'd like to maintain the status quo, because what the commission has forced me to do is drive through literally two different constituencies to meet the needs of my constituents.

Mr. Scott Reid: In that particular part of the riding.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Correct.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Hoback, you also had a map, and you dealt with those areas, obviously, where your riding overlaps with Mr. Clarke's. But there's also another riding down here. Am I right?

Mr. Randy Hoback: I'm looking in the southern parts. If you go to map 1, you'll see that we've highlighted them. We'll see if this works. If you look in this area here, the city of Prince Albert is there.

Now, under the new proposed boundaries, these folks would actually be travelling into the next riding in order to have representation. If you look at the second area, approximately right in there, they already do most of their shopping in the city of Melfort. They do all their trade and commerce there already, so for them to go somewhere else doesn't make a lot of sense.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's an area that you currently represent that would be taken out under the proposal. Is that correct?

Mr. Randy Hoback: Yes. It's unfortunate that we don't have brighter highways there, because I can't pull up the highways here to get you exactly—

Mr. Scott Reid: It's Highway 11.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Actually, I think I'm pointing in the wrong direction here. If you go down to the bottom.... Basically, you have a situation where you have your constituents close to a riding office, within a half-hour's driving distance, yet now, because of the new boundaries and the way they've shuffled things around to create the urban centres, you force these people to drive an hour and a half to three hours, depending on the location, and on road conditions they're facing at that time of year.

Mr. Scott Reid: Where is the constituency office they would have to go to?

Mr. Randy Hoback: For example, in the St. Louis area, they would actually go to Melfort. We have a constituency office that's open there one day a month. They go there, for example, or St. Brieux. That part would go to Melfort. St. Louis would go to Prince Albert, all within easy driving distance, and also part of the normal routine they would have in their day-to-day shopping, sports, and in other events they would be doing with their families.

Mr. Scott Reid: Do I have any time left, or have I used it up?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Breitkreuz, did you actually have a specific change you were talking about? I didn't see a map in your presentation.

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz: There's an area that I would now have to represent that has been added to my constituency, and I would have to go into another constituency for most of the year to access that area.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's the—

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz: Maybe Randy can point that out there. It's up in the northern part of my area.

Yes, right there. I can't get there most of the year without going way out.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Keep in mind, this area here tends to flood in the spring. Two reserves are located in this area here. The driving is mainly through Highway 55 coming across the north end of my riding in order to get into that area there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cullen, for five minutes.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I have some sympathy. The riding I represent in British Columbia is some 300,000 square kilometres in size. I was just doing some math because I've never really done it properly. North to south is just short of a 31-hour drive, and it's almost the same amount of time going east to west. So I get the inconvenience and challenges of getting around.

One thing, Garry, is you were referencing your riding as a hub and spoke. We may have a difference of opinion around the term, because obviously with the earlier panel we've been focusing on Saskatoon and Regina. What I've been referring to and thinking of as a hub and spoke is if it was the shape of a pizza almost, where you have ridings extending out of a larger urban centre and you have four or five of them around the wheel as a hub and spoke.

I look at your riding, which is very similar to most other rural ridings in Canada, where you have a large area and then one or two main towns located in the riding. Do you understand why I might

have confusion about referring to that as a hub-and-spoke riding, in the sense that it's very different from what exists right now in Saskatoon and Regina?

• (1220)

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz: The point I was trying to make is that the voice of agriculture needs to be strengthened. You may not know, this committee may not be aware, that Saskatchewan has half of the farmland in Canada, which means that agriculture needs to have a strong voice. My riding depends on agriculture. Yorkton is the third-largest trading area in the province. We have 70 towns in the riding. Most of the riding is populated with farmers and—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Small villages.

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz: —70 towns. It's a challenge. If you were me, you'd hear the comments I get, such as, "You haven't been to our town yet this year." Figure it out. How many weekends are there?

Mr. Nathan Cullen: But do you see what I mean that it's not the same? It would be difficult to compare your riding to a Regina or a Saskatoon situation, just in terms of the hub-and-spoke aspect. I understand that, yes, there is an urban or a semi-urban population in the middle, but that's no different. What's unique about Regina and Saskatoon, compared to other Canadian cities of some size, is what we call the hub and spoke, or this sort of pinwheel effect where you have four or five ridings all spreading out from one city centre.

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz: The point I'm trying to make is that agriculture needs a strong voice. If you end up taking and making purely urban ridings in the province, you diminish the voice of agriculture. That's the effect it would have on my riding. We need to have that strong voice, and the more MPs you have representing, or at least partially representing, rural areas, the stronger the voice of agriculture. It's so important to the Canadian economy.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: But here's what I'm trying to understand. Under the current proposal there would be six rural ridings, five urban ridings, and three mixed ridings. I'm not sure that the voices of agricultural Saskatchewan are going to be any less. Particularly if you look at where a lot of the industry connected to agriculture goes into Regina and Saskatoon, I'm sure those urban MPs, as the urban MLAs, also represent some of the agri-values.

Mr. Clarke, I want to get at something that was in your submission and that I'd love you to clarify, because on the surface I'm concerned...and I know you're guessing at what I'm pointing to. In your third point around population equity, you say:

The proposed changes also make the riding population more homogenous and decrease the influence of communities of interest. The already large percentage of First Nations has increased and it diminishes the influence of the rest of the communities.

This has obviously caused some reaction, particularly out of Lac La Ronge, a very large first nations community. The chief there, Chief Tammy Cook-Searson, wrote to this committee:

...we are offended by Mr. Clarke's suggestion that the "proposed boundaries also make the riding population more homogenous"...

—she quotes you here—

Mr. Clarke seems to suggest that the "already large percentage of First Nations" in his riding is somehow a problem that needs to be rectified.

Could you help me out here? Do you understand how that comment would seem offensive on the surface?

Mr. Rob Clarke: No. What I'm hoping to say here is that I represent all the constituents in northern Saskatchewan, from the aboriginal to the non-aboriginal.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Sure.

Mr. Rob Clarke: What I intended to say is that Lac La Ronge is in central Saskatchewan, and they don't have the same barriers or challenges facing the first nations in the eastern part of the province and the northern part of the province. She's perfectly entitled to her opinion; however, she has access to Cameco and Areva, major mining partnerships that would help benefit the Lac La Ronge Indian Band.

When we look at Red Earth, in the southern corner of the map, Shoal Lake, and Cumberland House, they're not part of that economic development plan in northern Saskatchewan whatsoever. That's where the inequality takes place.

We look at first nations issues, and the main driving force for any type of economic development is to empower first nations to participate in the hub of development to get away from poverty. When you look—

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Hold on. Just because—

The Chair: How about if you both hang on? Because he is past his time, we're going to move on to Mr. Dion, and hopefully we'll allow you to finish the answer to the question raised.

• (1225)

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I would like to start by asking Mr. Clarke not to take too much of my time but certainly to expand a bit more, because indeed I read the Lac La Ronge Indian Band comments where they say they are offended by your suggestion. The way they understand it is you are concerned that you will have too many aboriginals in your riding. It's what they understood, and I must admit that when we read the quote, it gives this sense.

Mr. Rob Clarke: No. That's—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: May I read it again?

Mr. Rob Clarke: That's preposterous to insinuate that. What I'm saying is that all individuals are supposed to be represented equally, and—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: No, no, excuse me—

Mr. Rob Clarke: —and what's happened is that the demographics have shifted—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Excuse me. I want to make sure. Think about this same quote:

The already large percentage of First Nations has increased and it diminishes the influence of the rest of the communities.

How can we—

Mr. Rob Clarke: Currently, if you look at the demographics of my constituency, 70% is aboriginal and 30% is non-aboriginal. What I'm trying to say is that you have to represent everyone equally. I was hoping to maintain the status quo. What I found the commission did was gerrymandering in trying to change the demographics of the riding.

What you're looking at is about economics for northern Saskatchewan. When you have the Pelican Narrows and the Sandy

Bays and you have to drive through Smeaton to access Prince Albert.... That central trading corridor is very beneficial for southern Saskatchewan into the agricultural area. They benefit both ways, because we're seeing first nations travelling up to Flin Flon, and they're also bringing back trade into those communities. The first nations are also dependent on the southern portion of the province or in the other constituency.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: So you're saying that 70% is enough.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Seventy per cent is aboriginal currently under—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Yes, and you don't want more.

Mr. Rob Clarke: No, I didn't say that at all.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: The way it's written...and again, you mentioned the 70% as if it were a problem.

Mr. Rob Clarke: It's not a problem—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: You—

Mr. Rob Clarke: If you turned it around the other way, if you add more non-aboriginal communities, the same argument could be made.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I think you will have to live with this comment.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Oh? As a first nations person I have to live with that, Mr. Dion?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: No, no, I understand why people—

Mr. Rob Clarke: Mr. Dion, as a first nations person I have to live with that?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: —are offended by that.

Mr. Rob Clarke: No, I'm offended by what you just said.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Well, you—

Mr. Rob Clarke: I'm offended by that.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Yes, okay—

Mr. Rob Clarke: What are you saying, Mr. Dion?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Well, I'm offended—

Mr. Rob Clarke: No, Mr. Dion, what are you saying right now?

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I'm saying that—

Mr. Rob Clarke: Are you're saying that being an aboriginal, I can't represent everyone equally, and to the non-aboriginals...? That's what you're saying.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: I said that an MP who is accusing a commission of doing gerrymandering because the commission is increasing the numbers of aboriginals in his riding is saying something offensive. That's what I'm saying.

Where does the 75% come from? Except for Mr. Marit, we didn't see any proof of it, and the majority of the commission...and I must say that I have a strong regard for Mr. Courtney's ability to count, because he's a great political scientist. The commission has little doubt.... I will quote the commission:

The Commission has little doubt, however, that the general public accepts the new electoral districts as a genuine effort to comply with the principles of the Act and to ensure respect for the democratic process.

They also say that “a large number of contacts were inspired by the encouragement of members of Parliament opposed to the abolition of rural-urban hybrid districts”. The *StarPhoenix* says the same, in that a number of proposals that were against the majority report “consisted of pre-formatted postcards distributed to supporters by Conservative MPs”.

This is something that was said in your province, so what is the committee supposed to do with that?

The Chair: First we'll hear from Mr. Breitzkreuz and then Mr. Hoback. Or Mr. Hoback first...?

Mr. Randy Hoback: People have their own ways of expressing their concerns at committee. Some do it through cards. Some do it through presentations. Mr. Marit is quoted as saying 75%. That's Mr. Marit, one of the commissioners, and that's his quote. That's where that number comes from—

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Yes.

Mr. Randy Hoback: —and I read that in my presentation.

When I did my presentation in Prince Albert, the *StarPhoenix* and the *Leader-Post* were not present. Maybe they attended in Saskatoon and Regina. Maybe there are different types of presentations.

But I'll tell you that in Prince Albert it was I think twelve to one who were saying “status quo”, and the one was actually looking for changes because, again, she lived just 30 kilometres outside of Prince Albert, yet she was included in the North Battleford riding. Out of the presentations in the city of Prince Albert, there was nobody asking for this drastic change.

The focus here is getting lost; it's getting lost in the fact that we want this rural-urban blend or an urban riding and a rural riding. The focus needs to be on how we best serve constituents across the province. When you focus in on just urban seats, you make the rural riding so unworkable that it actually defeats my ability to properly represent those constituents.

Mr. Cullen, you talked about your big riding. There are unfortunate circumstances. Mr. Clarke has an unfortunate circumstance, because he has a big area with a large population, but when you go to the southern half of the province, there's no reason to do that. There's absolutely no reason to do that, yet for some reason they felt that they should.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you. We're well past the time. Hopefully someone else will give you a chance to answer the question.

Next I have Mr. Gill.

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank our witnesses.

I just have one question, and then I'd like to share my time with my colleague, Mr. Menegakis.

I guess it was one of the members of the commission who suggested that members would be able to use Skype to communicate and meet with their constituents and so on. I'm wondering how practical that may be in your ridings, if each of you can explain. I

can tell you that I represent an urban riding, where I would say at least 95% of the people do have Internet and other means, but still they would prefer to meet with me in person to discuss their issues, whatever they may be, and I prefer the same. I like to have that face-to-face meeting to really understand, to meet with them first-hand and understand their issues and concerns and other things.

I'm wondering if each of you could give us that perspective.

Mr. Randy Hoback: IT won't even let us use Skype, so that's not even an option to members of Parliament here in Ottawa. To Skype out of our Hill office is impossible. We are not allowed to use that program. Again, I assume it's to do with the technology and maybe the security. That issue might be the reason, but we can't use it, so that's not even an option. For them to even throw it on the table is kind of hilarious.

The reality is that—you're correct—when I go to the riding of Prince Albert, when I fly home on a Thursday night, I spend Saturday and Sunday in the riding visiting constituents, and I drive and drive on the weekends because they want to see me face to face.

If we want to use Skype and technology, why don't I stay in my riding and Skype in my vote and Skype in my attendance at committee? There is reality in why you want to be face to face. The point is that you want to understand the body language and the context behind the conversation. Face to face is the only way to effectively do that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Garry Breitzkreuz: I don't think people understand what we face. My cellphone works very well when I crawl onto the roof of my house. That's what we're working on right now.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Rob Clarke: You mentioned about 300,000 kilometres. Mine is 348,000 kilometres, so we know the problems we face in northern Saskatchewan. One of the things is remote communities in northern Saskatchewan, or in my constituency. When I go into the riding for two or three days, I'm shut off from the outside world. I don't have communications through cellphone or a lot of times through e-mails, or even through the luxury of having a computer. That's the challenge I face in northern Saskatchewan just in regard to technology. So when I hear the recommendations made by the commission, I know it's preposterous to even try to contemplate that in my riding.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

Thank you to our colleagues for appearing before us today. My question is around the concept of communities of interest. I'm reminded a little bit of a system we have in Ontario where we have four levels of government, in essence. We have municipal, regional, provincial, and then federal.

The region does this. Saskatchewan, as a province on a much larger scale, reminds me of the same thing, although the region I live in is 1.1 million people, roughly the same as the population here. There are things that tie the community together, irrespective of the distance. That was a key point in Commissioner David Marit's report, in which he dissented from the other two members of the commission.

I wonder if you could comment on just that point with respect to your ridings.

Go ahead, Mr. Hoback.

• (1235)

Mr. Randy Hoback: It's actually really interesting. I know Mr. Cullen used the example of the 500-acre farmer and the 700-foot loft, but the reality is that it's the daughter of the 500-acre farmer who bought the 700-foot loft in Regina. The reality is that if you look at the city of Saskatoon, the college of agriculture is located there. If you look at Viterra, the location is in the city of Regina, yet its core functions are outside the city per se. So to say that they're different is totally not fair in the province of Saskatchewan.

I could see that in Toronto, yes, there are different sectors, different types of economic activity going on. They would be unique, and characteristics would be different. But in Saskatchewan, whether it's mining, agriculture or forestry, what you've got are two service centres, Saskatoon and Regina, that are educating our kids to go into those sectors that are providing a service by having the head offices located in those facilities. That's why it's combined, and it's always consistent.

A good example is my own family. We grew up in Canwood, Saskatchewan, and my daughter went to Saskatoon Business College. That's what you do. That's how Saskatchewan functions.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Menegakis.

Mr. Cullen.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Randy, I want to pick up on that because 70% to 85% of the economy of British Columbia comes from the rural parts of the province, but we don't have this hub-and-spoke sense that happens in Regina and Saskatoon. All the mining outfits that work in my part of the world have their head offices in Vancouver, but we would never imagine it tenable to have some "extension riding" that had a little bit of downtown and a lot of rural. So I'm trying to understand what's unique about Saskatchewan. Of course there's mix and flow. The young people in my riding go to the city for education at university and of course there's interchange.

I want to give something to Rob, and I realize that the passions were strong earlier in your exchange with Mr. Dion. There are two things I want to understand in your comments. One is the homogenous part. Could you clarify it for me? I'm not lobbing an accusation at you, but it caused some reaction and it caused some offence. You are concerned about the riding being too homogenous. My riding is 40% first nations, and there are other ridings in the country that are higher than 70% or 80%, but you presented it in a way that made it seem like that's a problem. I want to understand.

Mr. Rob Clarke: What I'm hoping for is for everyone to be represented equally. I come from a non-aboriginal background... sorry, a first nations background. Everyone is entitled to the same representation. What I fear is what's happening in the economics portion of the constituency. The Lac La Ronge Indian Band has all the advantages of having the offices of Areva and Cameco in that community. We have Red Earth, Shoal Lake, and Cumberland House, and they don't have the economic opportunity to participate.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: You're making a distinction between first nations communities here. Is that one that is closer to the urban centre—

Mr. Rob Clarke: This is northern Saskatchewan. You talked about communities of interest. It is very unfortunate how the boundaries were drawn up. What we've seen is communities being removed in southern portions of the riding. If the commission had a common-sense approach, there wouldn't have been an issue. Right now, in the current system, I'm not happy with what the commission has recommended. If they had left it at the status quo, if they had left it at normal, I wouldn't have had a problem with it.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Let me take you up on this. You used a word earlier that I'm wondering if you're going to stand by, because it's a powerful word when we're talking about electoral commissions. You said the electoral commission "gerrymandered" the riding. Do you stand by that statement?

Mr. Rob Clarke: Well, they've taken population away from me and haven't replaced that population. That's where I get upset.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: But do you understand my question about gerrymandering? Gerrymandering is a specific idea, and you've said the commission gerrymandered the riding.

Mr. Rob Clarke: I stand by that comment.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Gerrymandering is a process of setting electoral districts that attempts to establish a political advantage for a particular party or group by manipulating district boundaries to create partisan-advantaged districts. Is that what you're suggesting? It's a pretty strong accusation of the electoral commission to say that's what they did in this case. Do you follow my point here?

Mr. Rob Clarke: No, I get it. What I'm saying is gerrymandering is what they've done in not replacing any population. My opinion is that they haven't met the mandate of what the commission is supposed to be doing, and that's where I get upset.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Okay.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Cullen, at the start you asked what the difference was between Saskatchewan and B.C. There's quite a difference. The average population in Saskatchewan per MP is 68,000 to 70,000 people. When you go to B.C., it's probably 120,000 to 130,000 per MP. The limitation factor for an MP isn't the number of people; it's actual distance. It's the ability to travel and see your constituents and the distance involved.

It's unfortunate that we have to have some big ridings. That's the reality. But we don't need to create urban-rural divisions when you're not hitting that 100,000-person threshold. That's not the factor. Having somebody in Saskatoon with 68,000 people in a 12-block centre, and then having the MP right next to him travelling 600 square kilometres—that doesn't make a lot of sense for constituent service.

• (1240)

Mr. Nathan Cullen: I understand.

I wonder if I have any time left.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: It wasn't my intention, Chair. Randy slipped one in on me.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Armstrong.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Mr. Clarke, I want to clarify some things. The area of your riding that has been removed by the commission is primarily one with more urban enterprise centres. Is that accurate?

Mr. Rob Clarke: Yes. What they have done is they have forced me to drive through Mr. Hoback's new riding of Prince Albert. It effectively makes me travel two hours just to reach the eastern part of the constituency.

Mr. Randy Hoback: It's through this highway here.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Yes.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Now, if you look at the people in this area of Rob's riding, they actually drive into Choiceland, this area here, to do their shopping. That's their first contact into their commercial activity.

That has historically, in the old boundary, been part of Mr. Clarke's riding, even though it's in that area there. That was the logic of the previous boundary commissions in including that with the northern riding.

That's what Mr. Clarke is trying to say—that by having this area here, you actually do have a community of interest with the people who come out of this region who shop in that area.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: That's the shopping district. So what they've effectively done is move the enterprise centre, the sort of service centre for that southern part of your riding, into a different riding.

Mr. Rob Clarke: That's correct.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: When you were talking about the demographics and the problem with the new riding boundaries, what you were really getting at is that the more enterprise areas, areas where economic activity actually centres, are now being pulled away from your riding, leaving your riding separated from some of the economic enterprise zone in your riding.

That's what you were trying to get at. Am I accurate in saying that?

Mr. Rob Clarke: That's correct. Most of the trade now—or what could possibly happen—will go back into the Choicelands, the Smeatons, the Loves, the Nipawins, and also into Prince Albert.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: When you're talking about ethnic diversity and the.... You were talking more from an economic point of view. As someone with a first nations background, obviously you're not going to have any problem representing first nations people.

What you were getting at is that you're now having a separation in your riding—a population in that riding separated from the enterprise zone, where they actually shop and do their business.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Well, that's the problem I had with the commission. They missed the grand scheme of things in terms of the

economics in northern Saskatchewan. Mining, forestry—everything is focalized on resource development.

When you have communities in the eastern part of the province that get flooded out regularly on a year-by-year basis, that are secluded because of roads, floods, or fires, it makes it very difficult for them to even participate in any type of economic development.

When I look at northern Saskatchewan, especially central northern Saskatchewan, and see what's available to them, when other communities don't have the same availabilities, that's where I get frustrated. We look at northern Saskatchewan as a whole. The north is very resource-rich, and I'd like to see them prosper.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: So really, for the economic prosperity of the majority of the population in your riding, be they first nations or whatever ethnic background, it's better to have that service area in the riding so that if there are issues in that service centre, they're represented by the same representative in Ottawa.

Mr. Rob Clarke: That's correct.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Thank you.

Mr. Garry Breitreuz: But—

The Chair: Go ahead. Mr. Sorenson wants one little question here, and there's not much time.

Mr. Garry Breitreuz: Yes, okay.

Those comments are true for the entire province. This is not just one riding.

The Chair: Mr. Sorenson, you have a minute and a half.

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you.

I'm not a regular on this committee, I guess, but in Alberta we've been fortunate enough to see major growth population-wise, and we've received six more seats because of it. For us as members of Parliament, there's nothing we're more fearful about than boundary changes. For constituents, there is nothing more frustrating than moving from one constituency to another constituency.

Certainly I can see the concerns that some of your constituents would have in the long distance of travel when people from outside Regina are going into Regina to do their shopping.

The other thing, too, that I would have a question about is the cost. I know that even in my own constituency changes, very minor boundary changes and a name change, there will be significant cost.

I guess, Mr. Hoback, my question to you would be more with regard to the apathy of the voter in this switching. Listen, we understand it when we see a province that has population growth, but how should the average constituent understand it if you do have those on the commission who simply think it's time for a major change, even though population doesn't warrant it?

● (1245)

Mr. Randy Hoback: That's a good question.

Actually, it comes back to the mandate of the commission and the common interest scope. When you start putting people in ridings where they don't have common interests....

For example, if you put somebody in a riding and make him drive 300 kilometres one way to meet his MP, that obviously is not something that is relevant to that individual, to that constituent.

Let's go into the aspect of an election. When you're starting now to ask them to come out and vote, the first question they're going to ask is, "Why am I driving out of my region to vote? Why can't I go vote in Prince Albert, which is 22 kilometres away? Why do I have to drive to Saskatoon or Humboldt?"

It doesn't make sense. That's what's frustrating about the boundary changes that they've done here. They don't match the normal trade patterns of the individuals who do the activity in the province of Saskatchewan.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have.

It's been great to have you here today sharing your thoughts with us.

We had originally planned that the committee would look at the start of the B.C. report today. We are not at that point. We don't have it out to the members yet. So the B.C. report will wait till after break week. It was your chair's wishful thinking, not the fault of the analysts for not having it there.

I have nothing else for the good of the committee. We'll see you all on Wednesday afternoon this week.

The meeting is adjourned.

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