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• (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the long-awaited meeting number 58 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to begin its study of the Alberta electoral boundaries commissions report for the first hour and the Quebec electoral boundaries commission report in the second hour.

I want to thank you, colleagues, for coming back. I know we invited you in the past and that changed. Then we asked you to turn around really quickly, and you all have. That means a lot to us here at PROC. We acknowledge it and appreciate it.

The clerk and I will maintain a consolidated speaking list of members wishing to speak. I am sure it's going to be a very pleasant meeting. If it cannot be, I need all comments to go through the chair. Otherwise, among colleagues, I think we are good to go.

For colleagues on PROC, I would like to share that there are two budgets we will need to approve. There was also a letter sent around from the Joint Interparliamentary Council, which I think we can find a way forward on. I would encourage some side conversations so we can maintain the business of committee to stay focused on where we need more time. I'll leave that with you, as you are masters of this domain.

For our first panel, we have with us the Honourable Randy Boissonnault, George Chahal, Gerald Soroka, Arnold Viersen and Chris Warkentin.

With that, you will have up to four minutes for opening statements. I would appreciate any extra time back, rather than asking you to conclude your comments.

Minister Boissonnault, the floor is yours. Welcome to PROC.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault (Edmonton Centre, Lib.): Thanks, Madam Chair, and good morning, colleagues.

I truly appreciate this opportunity to come to PROC. I want to thank the committee members for their hard work on reviewing boundary readjustment reports. Meeting 58 tells me all I need to know.

It is a testament to the strength of our democracy that we have these open processes to create electoral district boundaries that, as best as possible, maintain population equality while taking into ac-

count important social and geographic factors. The process to date has been orderly—

The Chair: I am just going to pause the time to say that, as Canada has two official languages, we just need to maintain a bit—

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I'm going too fast. I told the translators I would be slower.

The Chair: I'm sure you've never heard that before.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I will speak more slowly, Madam Chair.

The Chair: We would be very grateful.

[*English*]

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Friends, I want to thank the non-partisan Alberta commission for its work and for efforts made following the public hearing process to respect some of the traditional geographic boundaries in Edmonton. One of those is 97 Street. We worked hard with colleagues to make sure 97 Street would be the boundary for the riding of Edmonton Centre, reflecting years of history.

With the utmost respect to the commission, I would like to share my concern that the proposed northern boundary of the redrawn constituency fails to account for the historical pattern for boundaries of ridings in the city of Edmonton, and the particular community of identity contained in north Edmonton in particular.

Yellowhead Highway 16 and the rail yards that run alongside it represent one of the most definitive geographic boundaries within the city. Through it, residents and products flow across, into and out of our city. Indeed, I'm proud to say that our government is currently partnering with the provincial and city governments to turn Yellowhead into a full freeway. It's a massive and long-awaited project that is going to benefit residents and bring more Canadians and visitors to our city.

While freeways like the Yellowhead are really important to connect people, they have the understandable effect of geographically separating neighbourhoods physically and psychologically, so it is little surprise that this boundary has been the northern boundary for almost 40 years, for everything from municipal to provincial ridings and boundaries. It is a clear boundary distinction between north and central communities.

Significantly, it is the border of 18 neighbourhood community leagues that run along the freeway. I believe this most strongly represents institutional recognition of this as an appropriate boundary.

Despite this, under the proposal there are three distinct communities north of the highway that have been separated from other north Edmonton communities and put into Edmonton Centre. This would put these neighbourhoods in a federal riding that is separate from their public school division and their provincial and municipal representation, and separate from the unique character that makes up north Edmonton. Respecting the community of identity contained in an electoral district cannot permit separating these communities from similar north Edmonton communities in this way.

Furthermore, this proposal fails to take into account the nature of this freeway as a major geographic feature of Edmonton. Therefore, I would propose that the northern border of Edmonton Centre remain the Yellowhead Highway.

I recognize that this correction may impact the population of the proposed Edmonton Centre electoral district. To respect the commission's median population quota, I would propose that the communities of Parkview and Laurier Heights be returned to Edmonton Centre. These neighbourhoods are well connected with the communities on the southwest border of the new riding. They share community leagues, schools and hockey rinks, and they would be well served by remaining in the riding they have been in since 2004.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

So, dear colleagues, I am proposing that the Yellowhead Highway remain the northern border of Edmonton Centre and that, on the population issue, the communities of Parkview and Laurier Heights be returned to Edmonton Centre.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boissonault.

Mr. Chahal, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Mr. George Chahal (Calgary Skyview, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair and colleagues at PROC.

I've provided an objection to the Alberta commission electoral boundaries proposal as well. I have two concerns with the proposed riding.

The first concern is around the northern boundary of Calgary McKnight, and the other concern is about the proposed names of the two northeast Calgary ridings.

Starting off with the northern boundary of Calgary McKnight, there are two maps here for your reference. One is of the whole city, and the other is an image that provides some clarity on the areas I will be discussing.

The proposed northern boundary of Calgary McKnight should include all homes south of 96 Avenue, which is Airport Trail. That's a highway that divides both of these constituencies. The most northeastern corner of the Saddle Ridge neighbourhood is currently included in the new riding of Calgary Skyview, as highlighted in yellow on the map. You'll notice that highlighted in blue is the highway that divides both communities.

You will also notice that north of the blue Airport Trail there are a number of lands that are undeveloped. Those are future undeveloped lands. This part of the city has some of the highest growth that we've seen as a city. From the 2021 census, I would argue that we may have already potentially increased population in the new north riding by 25,000 to 30,000 individuals. The other important item to note is that the yellow-shaded area cannot be accessed by the constituency to the north. All entry points into that area of Saddle Ridge must be through Calgary McKnight. This area of Saddle Ridge also shares a community association or, as it's referred to in other cities as well, a "community league".

The submission originally provided by many local leaders, elected officials and community organizations requested that a proposed riding use Deerfoot Trail, and northeast Calgary is very unique along boundaries such as major highways.

The commission also acknowledged that paragraph 15(1)(b) of the act goes on to provide that the commission shall also consider the following criteria:

the community of interest or community of identity in or the historical pattern of an electoral district in the province

I'd like to note for committee members that there is no impact on any ridings other than Calgary McKnight and Calgary Skyview, which is the new riding defined by the electoral commission. As mentioned, Calgary Skyview is the fastest-growing riding in the city of Calgary and the Calgary region. There's a lot of land that is currently planned and ready for development.

In terms of the impact on the two ridings, for the total population of Calgary McKnight, with the yellow area included in Calgary McKnight, it would bump up the numbers to about 131,000. The total population of Calgary Skyview would be reduced to about 107,000. This is not including any growth that has occurred over the last three years and, as mentioned, I believe we've seen about 25,000 to 30,000 new residents already in this area of Calgary Skyview.

There is a population variance. There is a precedent for this variance across the country. We've seen Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, with a variance of close to 19%. We've seen Moncton, with a variance of about 18.5%, and Kingston and the Islands, with a variance of about 15.3%. There is a precedent nationally.

The most important thing is that community members living in these communities be kept together and not separated from their places of worship—

• (1115)

The Chair: Mr. Chahal, we haven't had a meeting like this for a little while, so our technical skills are being improved, and your time is up.

Thank you.

Mr. George Chahal: Oh, okay.

The Chair: Just so you know, it's four minutes and seven seconds, so you went up by seven. The “beep, beep, beep” did not happen. In future you will hear a “beep, beep, beep”, and that will mean your time is up.

Mr. Soroka, the floor is yours.

Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair and committee.

I guess I would not be here today if I felt the commission had done properly everything it should have. When it first proposed this to the riding of Yellowhead, it was to increase it by about 12%, and I'm talking population, not area. That's about the only significant change.

What it has done, though, is to completely rearrange the entire riding, so that now I have 45% of the original riding and about 55% that's brand new. That, to me, is a substantial change. That is why I am here today to argue these points: There's no more continuity in any shape or form from north to south. I have essentially Calgary residents and, seven hours away, Grand Cache, a small coal-mining town, but also forestry, oil and gas, so quite a differentiation between them and the tourist areas on the west side, with Jasper and Banff national parks, and then Kananaskis Country.

When I start looking at the rationale, the commission itself didn't seem to make sense when it made the changes. When it first talked about continuity, that made sense. What it did was to combine certain ridings or make a new riding in an area that didn't exist before in the proposal. Doing that really reconfigured all of Alberta. When I say it didn't make it consistent, I mean it tried to make sure certain counties were together, so then it chopped Yellowhead in half.

On one hand they say, “We want to keep counties together,” and on the other hand they say, “No, we'll divide them.” Rocky View County now has four MPs representing it, so that doesn't make sense. When they start looking at populations, everyone is trying to get around 116,000. Now they have variances from 121,500 all the way down to 110,000, so again they didn't follow their own mandate. Doing a lot of these things means there isn't the continuity that I thought there would be.

They want to change the name from Yellowhead to Jasper—Banff—Canmore. I want to maintain the name Yellowhead for the historical value as well as the significance of David Thompson, the explorer. His name was “Yellow Head” or “Tête Jaune” in French. Apparently, they spoke a lot more French back then than they do now in my riding. That's the historical significance behind it. This is the reason I want to put Yellowhead back together. It's hard to maintain the name of Yellowhead when you have Yellowhead County split in half.

That is my main proposal. I know for a fact that it still doesn't address what I'd like it to do. I'd prefer to go back to the original

proposal. That made a lot more sense to me. By making these changes, yes, I'm affecting essentially five different ridings, but I have the full support of my fellow MPs. I'm not trying to make a change that will benefit one voter or one riding over another. Alberta, as you're well aware, is very strongly Conservative, so there isn't this, “Oh, my goodness, now we're trying to balance this out a little differently.” That's not going to be a factor.

Those are really my whole premises behind everything. I think I'll leave it there.

Oh, yes. Some mayors have also written letters giving their support as well.

Other than that, because I have full support and everything going through, I also feel that the boundary changes that I proposed will bring us to within 1,000 of that 116,000, so my recommendation comes a lot closer to what was desired as opposed to their proposal, which would be 5,000 to 6,000 over or under. As well, the boundary lines I've drawn make a lot more sense, with straight lines as opposed to all the curves and changes that way.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Soroka.

I really appreciate your going through our questions. That was noticed, and I want you to know that I appreciated that.

Mr. Viersen, you have up to four minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The rationale for the proposal I'm making—I think Mr. Warkentin and I are making the same recommendation—is that there was not a lot of objection to the original proposal. It seemed to make sense.

The ridings are called “Peace River” and “Grande Prairie” and, typically, folks who live in the particular ridings would like to be associated with the respective name. Grande Prairie is a distinct community, and Peace River is more of a geographical area in the Peace River basin. We call it “the Peace country”. It would be nice to keep folks who are associated with Grande Prairie in the Grande Prairie riding.

For example, I live about a four-hour drive from Grande Prairie. If I were going to Bezanson, DeBolt, Crooked Creek, Sexsmith, Beaverlodge, Wembley or La Glace—all or any of those communities—I would just say, “I'm going to Grande Prairie on the weekend,” even if I were not going to the actual city of Grande Prairie but to that general region.

Now, if you were going to High Level, for example, you'd say, “I'm going to High Level.” Folks from High Level have to pass through the town of Peace River. They live on the banks of the Peace River. They have an association with the Peace River that would keep it respective; it is about the name in that respect.

The other thing is just around the folks who are still struggling to adjust. People vote in the same place for a long time. I get a lot of complaints like, “Hey, I’ve always voted here, so why do I have to vote there now?” That continues to be a challenge. When we mess around with the boundaries, people end up having to vote in new places, and that causes confusion.

I would suggest that we keep the boundaries the same, as much as possible. The first proposal did that fairly well. It’s a logical thing to just say that the rest of Mackenzie County goes in. The logic of it is very good, and keeping folks who live near the city of Grande Prairie in the Grande Prairie riding makes a lot of sense.

There was not a lot of opposition to the first proposal. The challenge is that there isn’t an ability for our communities to voice their opinion except through this forum, and they’re not as engaged on it now. When I’ve been going through the communities and saying, hey, this is the new proposal, folks are like, “No, that’s a little bit odd.” The mayor of Mackenzie County has said that the first proposal makes more sense than the second proposal. I don’t believe that he spoke at all, one way or the other, on the first proposal, but I showed him the maps. I’m in the process of getting documentation to support that, but that can be provided for sure.

On the demographic consequences, given that it’s the first proposal, I think the demographic consequences are fine. There’s no domino effect. It’s just the two big ridings in northern Alberta that are changing. I have talked to colleagues in the area, and that seems to be fine.

The Chair: Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

I am going to pass it to Mr. Warkentin now.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie—Mackenzie, CPC): Thanks so much, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair, I’ve supplied committee members with a number of papers, including the current population statistics, those for the first redistribution proposal and those for the second redistribution proposal. I’ll leave it up to committee members to review what we are proposing. We could talk about that in the questions and answers.

I’ve also identified three specific maps: the current reality, the first proposal by the commission and the second proposal. As you can see, the highlighted area is actually Mackenzie County. That is a municipality of the northern region. I believe, as does Mr. Viersen, that municipality should remain intact. I have had the privilege of serving for a number of years. I lived through the last redistribution. Prior to the previous redistribution, that municipality was in fact intact.

What’s also important for committee members to understand is that not only does that municipality need to be intact, but also there are many first nations communities that live along Highway 58. If committee members look at High Level on the first map, they can identify that there’s a highway that leads across that portion of the province. Highway 58 really is a connector for first nations communities in that region. There are dozens of smaller first nations communities along that highway, and when I had the opportunity to represent the entirety of that area, previous to the past redistribution, the benefit was that I would be able to have regional meetings

in that area and bring everybody together. We also have a single MLA who represents that region, as well as the local municipal government, so when I would attend meetings, I was able to do that.

Currently, both members of Parliament have to drive for five hours for a single meeting when those large meetings happen. I’m certain that the commission wants to divide the land mass, so it’s important, I believe, for Highway 58 to be reunited in a single riding and for the municipal district of Mackenzie to be maintained in its entirety.

Going further south, the first proposal was to bring Mackenzie County back together in its entirety. Mackenzie County and the regional folks all supported that idea. They didn’t indicate that to the commission. They weren’t opposed to that; they were thankful that they were finally back in the same constituency, so they didn’t object.

Once the second proposal came back, which was to separate it, I heard large numbers of folks talk about their frustration with being divided again, so I think it’s important to bring the municipality, the school districts and the regional hospital in High Level—so people along Highway 58 and going in that municipality—to High Level.

Moving to the southern part of the riding and the swap that happened during the first versus during the second, the commission alternatively proposed an idea that both Sturgeon Lake and the communities of Crooked Creek and Goodwin would all be separated, cut out of the Grande Prairie riding and moved into the Peace River riding. The challenge is that they really would be geographically separated from folks they actually conduct business with. They really need to be tied back to Grande Prairie. That’s where all of the work is that these folks do. This is where they work. This is where they go to school. The school district stands over there.

I can answer additional questions, but hopefully that provides some clarity.

● (1125)

The Chair: That’s excellent. Thank you so much.

We’re going to enter into six-minute rounds. I know there is a desire to see more than one round. You can see the clock, and you know when the panel ends, so if you have any extra time, you’re welcome to pass it back to me and I’ll keep the meeting moving.

Otherwise, we’ll have six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

It’s great to see my Alberta colleagues here. I’m going to ask my first question to Mr. Boissonnault.

I take your point with respect to Yellowhead Highway, but in terms of the historical pattern of ridings, you submitted that this had been the boundary line for Edmonton Centre for the better part of 40 years. However, I would respectfully note that this isn't so. Prior to 2004, the former Edmonton West riding, and the former Edmonton—Northwest riding before Edmonton West, which encompassed much of the downtown core, extended north of the Yellowhead Highway.

I would further note that the communities that will now be placed in Edmonton Centre, north of the Yellowhead Highway, including Kensington and Athlone at the provincial level, had been in the former Edmonton—Calder riding for many years, a constituency that extended on both the north and south sides of the Yellowhead Highway, represented by MLAs David Eggen, Doug Elniski, Brent Rathgeber and Lance White. The current municipal ward of Anirniq, represented by Councillor Rutherford, extends south of the Yellowhead—or north of the Yellowhead, depending on how you look at it.

I'd be interested on your comments on that.

• (1130)

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Thanks, Madam Chair. I appreciate Mr. Cooper's questions. I'll take them in reverse order.

Anirniq is a great example. Councillor Rutherford is my councillor. If you take a look at Anirniq, the piece of that riding that actually straddles Yellowhead is an industrial area with very few residents living in it. It's an industrial area that actually preceded the Yellowhead coming through the city.

I think what we're working on, Mr. Cooper, is the fundamental principle of communities of identity. I'll check the record, but if I misspoke, it wasn't that Edmonton Centre has been the way it's been for 40 years; it's that many political boundaries have respected Yellowhead as a northern or southern boundary for 40 years, including a number of the provincial MLA boundaries and a number of the city wards.

Mr. Cooper knows the riding well, Madam Chair, because his riding is just north of it.

You can even look at school boards. We are contending that if we want to keep communities of interest together, we respect that northern border of Edmonton Centre. If there is any issue with population, because we understand that the commission has to be within 5% either way of 115,000—

Mr. Michael Cooper: I don't want to interrupt you, Mr. Boissonnault—

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Cooper: —but you did make the point about the population adjustment in your submission, and given the shortness of time, I have questions for other members.

I would note that with regard to other federal ridings, Edmonton North used to extend north of the Yellowhead as recently as prior to the last redistribution, and the riding of Edmonton East extended north of the Yellowhead. There's plenty of precedent for federal ridings, provincial ridings and municipal council wards extending north or south of the Yellowhead. I'll leave it at that.

Mr. Chahal, what you are proposing would result in a significant deviation with regard to Edmonton and Calgary federal ridings. I would also note that it appears that the commission made some adjustments with respect to Saddle Ridge based upon some of the input they had received. It's noted in the report that they configured McKnight having regard to it being a densely populated part of northeast Calgary. The commission further explained that they had taken the more densely populated parts of Saddle Ridge and put them in McKnight, consistent with creating a more densely populated northeast Calgary riding and the less densely populated neighbourhoods of Saddle Ridge and Skyview.

I'd be interested in your comments on both those points.

Mr. George Chahal: First of all, a community of interest or a community identity is identified in the act as a priority. This would go against that. Airport Trail is a major boundary. It's a highway. Saddle Ridge is one large community. Adding one part in and taking another part of Saddle Ridge out goes against paragraph 15(1)(b).

I would also like to note that for the provincial boundaries, as you addressed in your previous question, the Calgary—North East boundary is Airport Trail. The two provincial boundaries are divided by Airport Trail. There is no access into that yellow-hatched area that I've shown from Calgary Skyview. It all comes through Calgary McKnight through the community of Saddle Ridge.

The right thing to do, and what is in the best interests of community members and the community association, is to have a clear line, which is Airport Trail, to the city limits and all the way down to Métis Trail.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much.

Mr. Warkentin, with respect to the changes made in the final map, the commission has noted two things. One is the fact that Peace River—Westlock has seen a much slower rate of population growth, whereas the Grand Prairie area has seen a much faster rate of population growth. Second is the geographic size, in particular of Peace River—Westlock, or both ridings, in fact.

You addressed the latter point, but you may want to elaborate on that and address the first point with respect to population growth.

• (1135)

The Chair: Do you want this coming out of your next round? You were asking for two rounds.

What happens is that we go back and forth, and when we respect the amount of time one speaks and one answers.... I will note that Mr. Boissonnault was probably entitled to about 20 more seconds before he was cut off. I do take this role very seriously, and I do take this work very seriously.

Mr. Cooper, would you like an answer now or would you like to see if you get a second round?

Mr. Michael Cooper: We'll wait for a.... Well, 20 seconds.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I believe it's very important to consider the redistribution proposals. The first one actually better reflects the room for growth for the regions that are most likely to grow, whereas the second proposal actually puts the riding of Grand Prairie into a higher population number, which obviously doesn't allow for the growth that we expect in that region. Grand Prairie has been the growth centre and will continue to be the growth centre.

I believe putting it at a lower number, like the first proposal did, is the right thing to do. The commission got it as good as they could in the first report, I believe.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Warkentin.

I will now go to Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

My first question is for Mr. Boissonnault.

You spoke a little about community organizations that border the Yellowhead Highway. Would you be able to share more or reflect a little more on why keeping the highway as a boundary would be important to these organizations?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: Just to give colleagues a little context about community leagues, they were founded around the same time the city was founded, in about 1904. In the city of Edmonton we have 160 registered associations that call themselves community leagues. They're all volunteer-run, with about \$100 million plus in assets, with community gardens and what have you.

In my riding of Edmonton Centre, there are 26 community leagues. If you take a look along the Yellowhead freeway, there are 18 community leagues, the entire length of the Yellowhead freeway, that use it as the north to south boundary. Nine community leagues south and nine community leagues north are using the Yellowhead as the boundary.

How did community leagues grow? They grew around their actual neighbourhood. The community leagues themselves are saying that this is a man-made geographic border. If you look at the maps we sent and that I know you all have, it literally is like a man-made river that runs through the city. It's a river of traffic. It's a river of goods. I know what it's like when I travel east or west in that riding. You actually have to make a conscious decision as to which road you're going to take to get through the tracks. You're not turning on every street corner to get through the tracks, because otherwise the trains wouldn't run. It is a geographic barrier.

If you look at postal codes, Ms. Sahota, they use the Yellowhead as north and south boundaries for postal codes. For businesspeople, if you look at the Kingsway business improvement association, which is in my riding on the north side of Edmonton Centre, the Yellowhead is the natural border there. It is a natural border. It's a community border. You don't see kids crossing that highway to go to school. It doesn't make any sense. There would be not a safety issue but just a community of identity issue.

In that sense, it's our contention that from a community identity perspective and a community of interest perspective, as Mr. Chahal said, the northern boundary should be maintained as Yellowhead.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Mr. Boissonnault.

Mr. Chahal, I want to know a little more about the objection you're making here today. Is this an objection you made previously to the commission, or is this a new one? Have things drastically changed between versions one and two of the commission's report?

Mr. George Chahal: Thank you, Ms. Sahota.

In version one, they did not use Airport Trail as a defined marker. They cut out other communities. After the objections made by community members, they've included those. However, in doing that, they cut out another part of the community.

In their original objection, the community asked to keep the entire community association together. Those are the communities south of that blue line—Airport Trail—because they are one community. They're the same community association. They share the same rec centre, schools and places of worship. They are separated from the new riding by swaths of development land. We don't know when that will be developed. There's no access to that middle yellow area from Calgary Skyview. There's a highway in between.

I think the commission was trying to adjust population variances, not taking into account that Calgary Skyview, as proposed, is probably already at the population variance. In the next decade, it will become much higher, because of the tremendous growth northeast Calgary is seeing. That's clear with everything we see on the ground and in working with colleagues at other levels of government.

I want to note, once again, that the provincial boundary is Airport Trail. It's clearly defined, because there's a highway dividing northeast Calgary.

● (1140)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Is there anything else you'd like to add about the communities of interest?

Mr. George Chahal: The only other piece I'd add is this: There is precedence, in other parts of the country, for the variation. I think this would provide northeast Calgary with a lot of growth. That community would probably equal out, if it hasn't already done so, in population variance.

The only other piece is on the objection to riding names. I didn't get a chance to talk about it. In the original submission made, Calgary McKnight, the airport was not included, and now it is, so I would suggest Calgary McKnight be called "Calgary Skyview". The new riding of Calgary Skyview, as defined, would be called "Calgary Stoney" or "Calgary Country Hills" to better reflect the communities represented on both sides of the Deerfoot Trail. Country Hills is a major thoroughfare in central northeast Calgary. That would be a better representation of the new riding, or "Calgary Stoney," because Stoney Trail runs through it.

That would be my second objection for community identity, in order to better identify the communities and help folks know who their representatives are—how they're best represented, moving forward.

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Therrien.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to welcome our colleagues, who have explained their position on the redistribution to the committee. I am very pleased to hear their views.

My first questions are for my colleague Mr. Boissonault.

I come from pretty far away from this region. I am trying to understand the situation based on the maps I have in front of me. Honestly, it's a part of the country that I don't know and I should absolutely go and visit one day, if you invite me, of course.

Let me know if I am mistaken.

You want to remove part of the proposed area of the riding: Athlone, Calder and Kensington.

How many electors does that represent?

Hon. Randy Boissonault: I don't have the exact figures for the three communities, but I can tell you that the balance of these three community leagues or neighbourhoods is equivalent to Laurier Heights and Parkview. That would make it possible to keep communities with the same interests together.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Right.

That is why you say that some communities would be left out, but we would get other communities elsewhere to make up the number of electors. So that answers my question.

I have another question I'd like to ask.

In Quebec, we don't have community leagues. I don't see exactly what that means. Can you explain it in 30 seconds?

Hon. Randy Boissonault: In the good old days in Alberta, going back to 1904 or 1905, people identified with a certain neighbourhood. Mine, which is Inglewood, but also Westmount and Garneau, are different communities that adopted a name to identify themselves. The people said they wanted to have their own community identity. So they took over the funding for these leagues. Over the years, they created community leagues and managed facilities

and community halls. Some community leagues have lovely facilities with community gardens and so on.

In my own riding, there are 26 community leagues, and there are 160 in the whole city.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Right, thank you.

I imagine the development underway at the former airport in your region represents potential demographic growth. Have the commissioners taken that into account? You can answer yes or no, but what is your opinion on this subject?

Hon. Randy Boissonault: That is a question you would have to ask the commissioners. According to the City of Edmonton's figures, the Blatchford project represents potential demographic growth of 30,000 people. If the calculation turns out to be accurate, that could mean moving the border of Edmonton Centre to 142nd Street Northwest, and maybe farther, taking in even more of the riding.

In view of that, it is obvious that the area of Edmonton Centre will be reduced. We are not there yet, since the houses and residential buildings are in the process of being built, but in ten or 20 years it will have a major impact on Edmonton Centre.

• (1145)

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you.

Mr. Chahal, I am pleased to meet you.

What is your proposal concerning the municipal councillors who are included in your riding? Do those people support you? Do you feel you are representing your corner well?

We noted that when you requested a meeting, no member from Calgary expressed their support for your proposal. I would therefore like to hear from you both on the position of the municipal councillors in your community and on what the councillors for the communities around you think about it.

[English]

Mr. George Chahal: Thank you, Monsieur Therrien, for your question.

In the objections, I think both counsellors objected to the original proposal. Both would also argue that clear boundaries be defined by keeping communities of interest together and keeping these major roadways as the boundaries between the communities. I have three city councillors whom I overlay right now, and several MLAs. There are four of them.

As I mentioned, at the provincial boundaries there's the Airport Trail. That major highway is the boundary between the two provincial ridings. Through city council, this goes through the riding of one constituency of a city councillor.

The new Skyview riding would have several city councillors, because there's another highway that intersects them. The main point made by our former mayor, Mayor Nenshi, and others was to keep community organizations, associations and leagues together, and not separate them. What this new proposal has done is take one community, which has a strong relationship and interest with its community members, and divide it. It puts it in a riding with no direct connection, but also a big gap in how to connect with those community members and representation moving forward.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: What you're telling me is clear, but I still don't know this part of the country very well.

What reason do you think the commissioners have for doing this and dividing a community in half, as you say?

[*English*]

Mr. George Chahal: That's a very good question.

It's all based on population. Using the 2021 census data, they aligned the population. This part of the city has seen tremendous growth. The new Calgary Skyview is the fastest-growing riding. I would argue that over the last two and half years, it's probably seen 30,000 new members.

It's just to balance the population. That's why there's a number of precedents across the country. I think if you did the census today, you would see it very closely aligned, based on the real numbers of the day.

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mrs. Blaney, you have six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

I thank all of you for being here today to talk about this really important issue.

Before I ask questions, and I will get to them, I want to read a notice of motion for the committee. I'm hoping to read it in, and we can have a chat about it later on, because I really want to get into the questions. I just wanted to let the committee know as soon as possible. I've made sure, of course, that our clerk has a copy. They can be handed out for you guys to reflect on.

My motion is simply that the committee, as part of its study on foreign election interference, invite the independent special rapporteur on foreign interference, David Johnston, to appear before the committee no later than the week of April 24.

I'll leave it at that. I'm happy to have conversations later on.

If I can, I'll start with you first, Mr. Chahal. It seems to me that your suggested change would give the proposed Calgary McKnight riding an inordinately large population. In fact, it would be the biggest in the province.

Could you give us any suggestions as to what areas might be removed from McKnight to account for this, or if that's part of your plan?

Mr. George Chahal: It's not. The Calgary Skyview riding now represents over 160,000 individuals, based on the 2021 census. I believe it's much higher. All we've asked for is that those communities be kept together. If there is a larger variance, community interest and identity are more of a concern than the population. The new riding of Calgary Skyview is the fastest-growing riding. It's already probably grown by 30,000 over the last two and a half years. I don't see the population variance being a concern. With the adjustments made, I believe they are now probably equal.

There's no new growth in the new Calgary McKnight, or it's very minimal. All the new growth in Calgary, as you see in the swaths of land provided in the maps, is in the north centre and northeast of Calgary. With newcomers coming, I would anticipate Calgary seeing about 30,000-plus newcomers per year, with 40%-50% residing in this northeast, north centre quadrant.

● (1150)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Mr. Boissonnault, perhaps I will go to you second.

It seems to me that you argued that the Laurier Heights and Parkview neighbourhoods should be added back to Edmonton Centre, because they share community halls with the Crestwood neighbourhood inside the riding. I have been there, but I am not an expert on all these neighbourhoods, so I apologize if I am mistaking any of this.

However, all three of these neighbourhoods have separate community halls and community leagues. They are all in the Edmonton community league district E, but district E is split in half between the proposed Edmonton Centre and Edmonton West.

Could you explain why the community leagues in Laurier Heights and Parkview are connected to Crestwood and not the adjacent neighbourhoods of Lynnwood, Jasper Park and West Jasper Sherwood?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: That's a good question, and thank you for your work on this committee. I know you do a lot of good work on this committee.

What I'll say about Parkview, Crestwood and Laurier Heights is that there's a particular development that's happened in that part of Edmonton. It's the south part of the riding, which follows the river. Some of that is population growth. Some of these community leagues are in the wealthier areas. There's fierce identity within community leagues.

Each of them, over time, was able to raise enough money to create their own community league. For example, in Parkview, our government was able to provide some money to upgrade a 50-year-old rink, which is shared by three different schools. They actually have kids coming in from different parts of the leagues to use that shared rink. The curling rink that's in Crestwood, for example, is the curling rink for the whole south part of the riding.

What you've seen over time is not just a development of the community league. The city analyzed the needs in each community league. That's a contiguous part of Edmonton Centre. It has been since 2004. It would offset the 10,000 people who would be represented by adding Calder, Athlone and Kensington on the north side. That part could become part of Edmonton-North West; it would keep what has now been moved out of the riding in the riding, and you'd have a contiguous whole.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm curious. Adding Laurier Heights and Parkview would reduce the population of Edmonton West by about 6,000, if I got that correctly, and then the proposed Edmonton West riding is already below the population quota.

Do you have any other areas to suggest that might be added to Edmonton West to account for this?

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I don't have any other suggestions for Edmonton West.

Following up on what Mr. Chahal is saying, we see population growth taking place across what is now the riding of Edmonton Centre, and those areas of Edmonton West and Edmonton-North West will continue to grow. We would be within the population boundary, plus or minus 5%, of 115,000 in Edmonton Centre. We have looked at the regional map, and by adding the riding that is coming to the region, we think that all those ridings would have the growth they need to be within that, plus or minus 5%.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I understand that the commission doesn't actually look at future growth of the population, but I thought I would just add that.

I have only a few seconds.

Mr. Soroka, what is the value of trying to keep all of Yellowhead County in one riding, when doing so requires splitting up other counties? Could you help me understand that?

Mr. Gerald Soroka: Currently, the counties I'm changing are already divided up, so all it's doing is moving the boundaries in different areas. It also gives more unity to Yellowhead as one entire county. The other thing is that some of the boundaries the commission used were quite disjointed and very hard to follow when you were trying to campaign.

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you so much.

We don't have a lot of time left before the next panel.

We're going to go for a couple of minutes to Mrs. Kusie, and then we'll go to the Liberals.

• (1155)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, fellow Albertans, for being here today.

Mr. Chahal, I'm going to read from the commission report:

The Commission received...representations...urging it to keep the northeast sector of Calgary together in two electoral districts, Calgary Skyview and the re-named Calgary East, consisting of closely connected communities with shared interests and priorities. Some argued that the Commission should base the electoral districts on the City of Calgary municipal wards, of which there are 14. However, the Commission had only 11 electoral districts with which to work, making compromise inevitable. The Commission had proposed three electoral districts for the northeast.... The two electoral districts recommended by the groups would be located east of Deerfoot Trail—

Interestingly, it's not on the Conservative side of Deerfoot Trail, in the west.

—north of Glenmore Trail...and bounded by Calgary's eastern and northern...limits.... However, the recommended changes could not be accomplished without making substantial alterations to the boundaries of many other electoral districts in Calgary.... For these reasons, the Commission did not accept the groups' recommendations.

However, the Commission has made some modifications in response to the groups' concerns. It has [as you mentioned] added the Calgary International Airport, an important economic hub with close ties to adjacent communities, to the Calgary McKnight...district. It has also modified the boundary between the Calgary Skyview and the Calgary McKnight electoral districts by adding more of the densely populated—

What I'm hearing is that you went to the commission with a proposal. They rejected the proposal. The changed information, as Ms. Sahota indicated, is now information you would like to change again, in this second iteration. I see that the electoral commission listened to your requests, but it is not responding to them, perhaps, the way you would have hoped. It is new information, but new information provided by the commission.

I also want to address your comments about the 14.3% variance, which, as my colleagues mentioned, is the highest. Two you mentioned, Dartmouth and Kingston and the Islands, are large rural swaths that do not have the flexibility of an urban environment.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Chahal, that was two minutes.

That was spoken very fast for interpretation, when I already said, one time, that we need to be mindful of this. I find it discouraging and disappointing. I have many other words that have not been heard. I hope people are listening to the words coming out of my mouth.

Mr. Chahal, I'm going to offer you one minute to answer.

Mr. George Chahal: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for the comments.

I didn't make a submission in the first one. Community organizations did that on their own, for the best interests of northeast Calgary. What they objected to was splitting up northeast Calgary communities. They asked that the community of Saddle Ridge—which was split up in the first one—not be split up. They added a part in but took another part out, in order to balance the numbers and variation.

In Alberta and across Canada, there are variations. As Ms. Blaney identified, we don't look at future growth; nor does the commission. We consider a variation. I believe the most important part of this committee.... The work it has done to keep communities of interest together is a priority. It's a priority to provide good representation. I think everybody, including the provincial boundaries, one of which is represented by the NDP, the other by the UCP.... They also have Airport Trail as a natural boundary.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Go ahead, Mrs. Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

Before I begin, I will be leaving some time to my colleague, so could your answers be short, please?

The one thing I want to mention, Madam Chair, that surprised me.... I read all these commission reports, and something sticks out from this one. It's on page 27 and a matter of concern. There seems to have been "a calculated effort" by an MP "to persuade the Commission to maintain the existing electoral boundaries". I'm just flagging that, because that's the only province I see this in. I know the analysts also highlighted this. It's something a little concerning.

My question is for Mr. Chahal and Mr. Boissonnault.

We heard from our colleagues, here, that there was support from other parties for their presentation. Question number 6 actually asked that. I know we have two different parties here on the panel. I wonder whether you could, very quickly, let us know whether you are in agreement with the colleagues who have presented here, today. Could you very quickly say yes or no, in terms of their presentations? We want to know whether other MPs are in agreement.

Mr. Soroka, could you let me know whether you're in agreement with the two colleagues next to you?

Mr. Gerald Soroka: I'm going to have to plead ignorance. I'm not that familiar with the communities of Edmonton and Calgary, even though my boundary is now going to be touching Calgary.

• (1200)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Chahal.

Mr. George Chahal: I would say yes, because everybody's clearly shown that they want to keep communities of interest and identity together, and I think that should be a priority. I think everybody's talked about that.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Boissonnault.

Hon. Randy Boissonnault: I support my colleagues on this panel.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: That's perfect.

Go ahead, Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I wanted to make sure that both Arnold Viersen and I were here together, because the changes we're

proposing affect just the ridings that the two of us represent. No other ridings are impacted. We came here together to demonstrate solidarity on that.

I don't believe that my colleagues who border some of these other members have been consulted with regard to these changes, and I can verify that they don't support them.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I would point out, again, that I don't know much about the areas in Edmonton or Calgary. However, I would point out that Mr. Warkentin and I, even under the new boundaries, have to drive through different portions of each other's ridings to get to other portions of our ridings. I would note that—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Viersen. Based on what the question was, the answers are not coming close, but the first three I will mark high.

Mr. Turnbull, you have one minute.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Mr. Chahal, I wanted to ask you a question. I noticed in your submission that you also included some comments around a name change. I wanted to get your perspective on that and why it's so important.

Mr. George Chahal: The new riding of Calgary Skyview, which is proposed with the name, I think is better reflected by "Calgary Country Hills" or "Calgary Stoney". They would be more appropriate names, because it's a new riding and it spans north centre and northeast Calgary. Those are major roadways that identify better with those communities.

The current Calgary McKnight would be better identified using the name Calgary Skyview, because it has the airport, and the communities that remain in that riding have mostly been Calgary Skyview historically. I think it's important.

One other point I'd like to acknowledge is that there is no other MP in the new riding, because it's a new riding. I haven't had the ability to talk to the MP of that riding, because I don't know who that's going to be, but I hope to work closely with him or her in the future.

The Chair: That's excellent.

With that, I would like to thank our colleagues, both in person and virtually, for joining us today. We wish you the best.

We will switch over to the next panel.

I'm going to try to maximize our time, colleagues. There are two budgets that need to be approved. One is for the redistribution for Alberta, which we're doing—lunch was provided—and the other one will be for the meetings that we have for the Quebec redistribution.

Are there any concerns with our approving this budget? I see none.

(Motion agreed to)

Clerk, I thank you for your work.

We'll welcome the Quebec panel and pause for a quick 30 seconds.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1205)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Resuming the meeting.

During the second hour of the meeting, we will begin our study of the report of the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Quebec 2022.

The second group of witnesses is composed of Maxime Blanchette-Joncas, Bernard Généreux, the Honourable Diane Lebouthillier, and Kristina Michaud.

Welcome, everyone.

Each witness will have four minutes to make their opening statements.

Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, the floor is yours.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dear colleagues, I thank the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs for having me here today.

I will take advantage of the forum I have been offered to explain my strong opposition to the redistribution proposal presented by the committee to which this important task was assigned. This is quite serious and, given the speaking time I am allotted, I will get straight to the point.

The proposal to decrease the political weight of the regions by eliminating the riding of Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia has to be reversed, since that would reduce the number of federal ridings between Montmagny and the Magdalen Islands to three from four. This is a frontal attack on the representativeness of our regions. To be perfectly honest, I have to say that I take strong issue with this. Even with the attempt to justify the proposal by saying that the population quotas have to be balanced, it doesn't pass the field test.

The realities of life in our region go well beyond columns of figures. The mayors and wardens who have long memories remember this. Until the 1960s, we had seven ridings between Montmagny and the Magdalen Islands. Since then, the redistributions have unfortunately caused an even greater lack of representativeness in eastern Quebec.

As if that is not enough, it is being proposed today that the number of ridings be reduced to three from four—and yet, let me remind you, the area covered has not shrunk. The federal government can keep making big speeches about the services offered in rural areas and the importance of revitalizing our part of the country, but they mean nothing if nothing is done to stop this. Nothing could be simpler: the political weight of whole regions is being wiped out, bit by bit. People who don't live where we do and may have never set foot there will be deciding the policies that affect us. They will be able to decide issues as crucial as how natural resources are to be exploited, and about agriculture, tourism development, fresh air, and heritage. We cannot agree to this. Worse still, eliminating an

entire riding would mean reducing the service centres and riding offices people have access to. These are crucial things for people living outside urban centres. These services make it possible to help people who suffer the failures of the federal government and give a voice to the many people the federal machine has left by the wayside. Reducing these services would have a disastrous effect for the most vulnerable among us.

The Commission is using the declining population observed in recent years to justify its proposal. But it is forgetting something: the positive net migration levels observed in the the Gaspé and Lower St. Lawrence regions in the past few years. The advent of teleworking, pressure on the property market in the big cities, and the desire to be closer to nature have prompted numerous households, including a number of young families, to settle in the regions, outside urban centres. That is a golden opportunity to promote our regions; we have to seize that opportunity, not lessen, diminish or erase those regions.

There is a simple, legal solution. Under subsection 15(2) of the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act, the ridings of Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia and Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine must be granted exceptional status, in order to preserve the status quo. I say this in all honesty: any other solution will be fatal for the interests of the people of the Lower St. Lawrence, the Gaspé and the Magdalen Islands. This will hurt the development of our territories.

Madam Chair, I will close by saying this. When political voices outside urban centres are stifled, rural Quebec as a whole is weakened. It is our heritage, our roots, our identity and our lower St. Lawrence values that will be wiped out.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr...

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Our part of the country deserves better, and it breaks my heart to have to point that out here.

The Chair: Mr...

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: On behalf of these regions, I ask that you preserve the status quo.

The Chair: Right.

If we want to have time to make comments and ask questions, the speaker has to yield the floor to me when I signal that their speaking time is up. I ask that everyone take this into account.

Mr. Généreux, the floor is now yours. Welcome.

Mr. Bernard Généreux (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the members of the committee for listening to me.

I would like to state my objections to the report of the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Quebec as it relates to my riding, Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, which the commissioners would turn into the future riding of Montmagny—Témiscouata—Kataskomiq, and the reasons for those objections.

If the proposed redistribution is upheld, I believe that the name Montmagny—Témiscouata—Kataskomiq is inappropriate. This is why.

Let's start with the positive. The reasons for adding Kataskomiq are appropriate, as an historic gesture of reconciliation with the First Nations, so we are in complete agreement with having that name in the name of the riding.

For several years, Montmagny, a regional county municipality, or RCM, has been part of what is called "Côte-du-Sud" at the provincial level, which includes the two other neighbouring RCMs: L'Islet and Kamouraska. In recent decades, these three RCMs have developed common public relations under this regional title, working through various organizations. "Montmagny" could therefore be replaced, with greater representativeness, by "Côte-du-Sud," a title that includes the RCMs of L'Islet and Kamouraska.

Témiscouata, which will join the riding with nearly 20,000 electors in 19 municipalities, must not be left out. We believe it is essential that its name be included in the name of the riding, if only out of respect for the electors there and for its unique identity.

The problem lies in the fact that "Rivière-du-Loup" is left out of the name of the future riding. It is wholly inappropriate to minimize the fact that the name of the most populous RCM and city in the riding is missing. Rivière-du-Loup is and will always be an important hub in the Bas-St-Laurent region. The RCM and city are host to a large number of services, industries, businesses, manufacturing plants, educational institutions and healthcare institutions, as well as the largest number of regional media in the entire Lower St. Lawrence region.

Rivière-du-Loup is much more than that, even. As I said, it is a crossroads. It is a road hub between the Maritimes, the Lower St. Lawrence region and the western part of the riding, a marine link with the North Shore, and an air link thanks to the Rivière-du-Loup Airport. It is a major lower St. Lawrence tourism hub, with the internationally recognized islands lying across from the city. As a tourism, cultural, economic and industrial hub, Rivière-du-Loup should be included in the final name of the riding.

I therefore very humbly ask that the committee, the Commission and its commissioners take note of my recommendations, which come out of a consultation with the wardens and mayors of the towns in my riding, both old and new, with the Chamber of Commerce of the RCM of Rivière-du-Loup and with Tourisme Rivière-du-Loup, so that the name of my riding becomes Côte-du-Sud—Rivière-du-Loup—Kataskomiq—Témiscouata.

It is a long name, but we like it that way. The order of the names follows the geography of my area. Going from west to east, we pass through Côte-du-Sud, the RCM and city of Rivière-du-Loup, and Kataskomiq territory, and finish in the RCM of Témiscouata. It is important that these four entities be in this order, so that it is clear for visitors and electors.

Before concluding, I would like to express my disappointment that under the present act, we are losing a riding in eastern Quebec. I believe that parliamentarians should revisit the question of what life is like for members of Parliament in rural regions in the future.

Thank you for your work, and I am counting on you so that this important recommendation about the name change for my riding is referred to the commissioners.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

● (1215)

The Chair: Bravo. Very good. Thank you.

Ms. Lebouthillier, the floor is yours for four minutes.

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier (Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would first like to thank you for taking the time to hear us today and to discuss such an important subject.

I don't think I am mistaken when I say that there is a common denominator that unites us this noon hour, my colleagues and myself, and that is the future of federal democracy in eastern Quebec, purely and simply.

I am here to voice my deepest concerns and those of my fellow citizens regarding the new electoral redistribution proposed in the Report of the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Quebec 2022. Certain factors make this proposal quite simply unacceptable and incoherent for the residents of my riding.

First, in 2016, the government of Quebec has granted special status to the Magdalen Islands because of their island nature. That status recognizes the unique challenges faced by the islands, particularly in terms of transportation and access to public services. The Magdalen Islands are located about 200 kilometres from the coast of Quebec. They are accessible only by plane, or by boat, if you have the time and patience to travel through two provinces, 700 kilometres on the road and five hours by ferry.

No—and yes, I mean no—other federal riding faces constraints like these. As well, no other federal riding endures the huge range of weather conditions that can regularly make travel difficult, if not impossible, and can have significant consequences not just for the residents and businesses on the islands, but also for the member of Parliament who represents them.

I have represented this beautiful riding for more than eight years, and believe me, snowstorms, fog, freezing rain, winds of more than 120 kilometres an hour, planes that can't take off, and cancelled tours—I have seen them all. The Islanders deserve a representative who is available and accessible to represent their needs and interests to the federal government. Adding two RCMs to the riding seriously jeopardizes that objective.

Second, the addition of the RCM of La Matanie to the existing riding of Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine would be patently incoherent in terms of geographic representativeness. That RCM is attached to the Lower St. Lawrence administrative region, also called region 1, while the rest of the riding comprises region 11. This means that La Matanie does not share its centres for services to the public, such as hospitals and other government services, or engage in economic and cultural exchanges, with the rest of the riding.

For all these reasons, while the status quo regarding the number of seats would be the preferable option, it would be more natural and consistent to add that RCM to the neighbouring riding, rather than to the new riding of Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Listuguj. The same is true for the RCM of Matapédia, which has already been part of the neighbouring riding since the last version of the Report. That would allow for fair representation of the interests and issues of the residents of those two RCMs.

In closing, I can confirm that in light of the results of a broad consultation with local actors in my riding, this approach is supported by all elected municipal representatives. In this regard, I have therefore filed letters of support with the clerk of the Committee, earlier this morning. One of them is from the mayor and president of the Communauté maritime des Îles-de-la-Madeleine, and the other is from the five wardens who make up the Regroupement des MRC de la Gaspésie.

Once again, I want to thank you for your invitation. I am prepared to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you for that fine presentation, Minister.

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor.

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank you, members of the committee, for having me here today and giving me the opportunity to advocate for my part of the country.

As I briefly explained in my notice of objection, I am firmly opposed to the electoral map proposal made by the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Quebec. More specifically, I am opposed to the proposal to eliminate the riding of Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, one of the four ridings in the large Eastern Quebec region. The reason is simple: erasing this riding from the map weakens the political weight of an entire region.

In defence of this proposal, which would have major repercussions for where we live, the Commission relies primarily on the idea of electoral quotient. However, and very respectfully, I am afraid that the Commission is overlooking crucial factors in its analysis. Those factors, such as respect for communities of interest, the historic pattern of the electoral district, and the goal of maintaining a manageable geographic size for districts in sparsely populated, rural or northern regions of the province.

The Lower St. Lawrence and Gaspé regions are sparsely populated and rural. The territory of these vast administrative regions is almost entirely occupied. From Montmagny to Îles-de-la-Madeleine, 184 municipalities and four Indigenous communities are grouped in

15 regional county municipalities, or RCMs, in addition to the Îles-de-la-Madeleine archipelago located in the centre of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The Commission proposes to redistribute half of the district to the neighbouring district of Rimouski—Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques and the other half to the district of Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine, thereby creating two territories of over 15,000 square kilometres each.

It will be apparent that because the territories of these ridings are almost entirely occupied, as compared to other ridings where the population is concentrated in only one part of the territory and the rest is virtually uninhabited, the concept of representation makes the times when the elected representative has to go out and meet their constituents particularly difficult and dangerous.

The importance of preserving the communities of interest and the historical pattern of the electoral district is also essential. Our region has a unique system of local governance that enables the various stakeholders to work well together and not pointlessly do twice the work. Chopping the map of the east in two will inevitably disrupt the balance and might result in a decline in services to the public, when the present size of the riding I represent already has its share of challenges.

The arguments I am making to you today were made to the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Quebec in September, by me, of course, and also by a large number of regional elected officials—mayors, wardens, members of Parliament and senators—who all, without exception, called for the status quo. For the people in my region, the solution is clear: we have to preserve the map as it stands. They are with me in their thoughts today, but they have also taken the time to make their opinions known in writing.

I have provided the clerk of your committee with a document containing 55 resolutions of municipalities, RCMs and civil society groups that unequivocally support what I am saying today. They agree with me that our region's political weight must be not only preserved, but protected.

The 125 members of the National Assembly of Quebec also support us in this effort. On March 7, they unanimously voted for a motion condemning the proposal to eliminate Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia and they are calling for this recommendation to be revised. Our Quebec colleagues rightly point out that any loss of political weight suffered by our Quebec regions jeopardizes the democratic health of our nation. Last, eliminating the riding I represent seems to be a concern for a number of my colleagues in the House of Commons.

You will probably have noticed that I have obtained the signatures of my three colleagues in eastern Quebec, who are present today, but also of members of each of the parties represented in the House of Commons. This unanimous feeling against the proposal to eliminate the riding of Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia shows that this issue goes beyond political and partisan divides and that it is everyone's duty to preserve the political weight of the regions of Quebec and Canada.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

The next rounds will be six minutes each. I ask that every one speak at a speed that enables the interpreters to do their job properly. They can raise their hand when necessary, and I will ask the person speaking to slow down. I hope I don't have to do it, but we will do what is needed to ensure that the meeting proceeds smoothly.

The next speaker is Mr. Berthold, who will be followed by Mr. Fergus, Mr. Therrien and Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Berthold has the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

By announcing that I was going to speak, you have reminded the interpreters that I have a reputation for saying a lot of words in a little time. I will be very careful today, in everyone's interest, and because we have a large number of witnesses today.

As a member for a region outside the urban centres, I have had several occasions to say how important and difficult our work is. There are 50 municipalities in my riding, and I am going to talk about the importance of representation in regions like this.

I would like to talk about one factor with Mr. Généreux.

Often, little attention is paid to the importance of a riding's name. Mr. Généreux, you made the change in your riding's name the focus of your presentation today. In the documents provided to the committee, I read a lot of testimony from people in Rivière-du-Loup who are afraid that the name of their city will disappear from the name of their riding, which virtually all members already find it hard to name correctly.

So you are asking that a name that is just as long be retained, once again. Can you explain to the committee what your reasons are for going in that direction?

• (1225)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: In fact, in various regions of Quebec, ridings have taken the name of well-known persons, such as the riding of Alfred-Pellan, for example, or of a very clearly defined geographic area.

The problem with our riding is that it overlaps two of Quebec's administrative regions: Chaudière-Appalaches and Côte-du-Sud, and, now, the Lower St. Lawrence and Chaudière-Appalaches regions.

As a result, as Ms. Michaud mentioned earlier, the territory is very large, with an area of almost 12,000 square kilometres. It is hard to give such large regions a single name.

The commissioners probably wanted to simplify my riding's name to three names instead of four by proposing Montmagny—Témiscouata—Kataskomiq as compared to Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, its present name. I am now proposing a name that has three letters more than what we had before that was considered too long: Côte-du-Sud—Rivière-du-Loup—Kataskomiq—Témiscouata. I am doing this out of respect for all of the people who live in this area.

Because the name of a riding may not contain the name of five regional municipalities and because we have to keep to a maximum of four, I am proposing Côte-du-Sud, which includes not only Montmagny but also the three regional county municipalities. The other two that are left out, Kamouraska, where I was born, and L'Islet, where I live now, are grouped with Montmagny in the Côte-du-Sud region.

Rivière-du-Loup is the most populous city in my riding and will continue to be in future. It represents 30 per cent of the total population of the region. You can't miss it. In fact, I did not understand why the commissioners removed Rivière-du-Loup from the name of the riding. They must have expected an objection, because the proposal makes no sense.

During the consultations, I raised this point and explained that Rivière-du-Loup absolutely had to be part of the riding's name. I am trying once again to persuade the commissioners. I hope that at the request of the population as a whole, the commissioners may revise their proposal. It must be admitted that people were not been out in the streets over this proposal. People were slow to react to the change of name proposal. I initiated discussions anyway, and as a result, the entire community of Rivière-du-Loup, including the chamber of commerce, industry and tourism and others, are asking that the name of Rivière-du-Loup continue to be part of the riding's name.

As I said before, some islands across from Rivière-du-Loup are internationally known. Société Duvetnor Ltée, which has been operating there for several years, is known for its great respect for the environment, the islands and the land. We think of this as all connected with Rivière-du-Loup, including, for example, the Rivière-du-Loup to Saint-Siméon ferry. Rivière-du-Loup absolutely has to be part of the riding's name.

I would also like to talk about Kataskomiq. Is my answer too long, Mr. Berthold?

Mr. Luc Berthold: No.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I didn't want to take up all your speaking time.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Honestly, I think the feeling of belonging to a riding because of its name is an important aspect in the discussion we are having today. That is why I wanted to hear your point of view and I wanted to let you speak after your official statement, to see what you were feeling.

At the end of your remarks, you said that the commissioners should have paid more attention at the outset to rural representativeness. That is what I understood.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: Yes, exactly. I firmly oppose the commissioners' choice to eliminate my colleague's riding in eastern Quebec.

The problem is that it was up to us, all of us around the table, to consider this possibility before agreeing to the new Elections Act that was enacted a year and a half ago. That was when we should have been thinking about how to make these changes.

The Supreme Court has made decisions in the past concerning certain riding redistributions, and I think they contain comments about effective representation that need to be examined in greater depth in the future when more changes to electoral boundaries are proposed.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fergus, the floor is yours.

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to congratulate all four of you for being here to show that you are in unanimous agreement on this subject.

Ms. Lebouthillier, I am going to ask you my first question. As you know, in its report, the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Quebec opposed the status quo because the difference between the population of your riding and what is called the electoral quotient was greater than 25 per cent.

If the RCM of Avignon were added to your present riding, as you are proposing, would that take the difference below the 25 per cent threshold, so that the provision for departing from the rule in exceptional circumstances could be argued?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Thank you for that question.

Before answering, I want to say that I agree with what Mr. Généreux just said. We really have to look at the representation of rural regions in the next stage, in ten years.

Mr. Fergus, to answer your question, the proposal I have made suggests that the RCM of La Matanie be transferred into the neighbouring riding. La Matanie has fewer than 14,000 inhabitants.

Given the present population, the electoral quotient of my riding, which has 75,927 inhabitants, is 35.5 per cent. I am aware that this falls below the 25 per cent threshold allowed in order to argue the provision in subsection 15(2) of the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act for departing from the rule. If we add the RCM of Avignon, which has 12,740 inhabitants, the difference falls to 20.6 per cent. That would then allow us to argue for the provision allowing for departure from the rule to be applied.

In other words, as the Commission said, no riding should have fewer than 81,749 persons; under what I am proposing, our riding would have 88,667 inhabitants. I will be happy to provide the calculations.

After consulting the people in my riding, I think this proposal is eminently reasonable.

Hon. Greg Fergus: If you could send them to the clerk, we would be very grateful.

In your presentation, you said that adding two RCMs to your riding would compromise the island character of the Magdalen Islands.

What impact would that have, everywhere in your riding, on the public's access to its elected representative, and, conversely, on that representative's ability to represent their constituents?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: As I was saying, the character of the riding I represent is unique in Canada. There is nothing like it in any other riding. The only ways to get to the Magdalen Islands are by plane and by boat. If you want to get there by boat, you have to travel 700 kilometres, go through two provinces, and spend five hours on a ferry.

The Magdalen Islands are a very unique place. I try to get there at least four times a year, but they are never for long stays, because there are storms, hurricanes, freezing rain, snow, and so on. The people on the Magdalen Islands have seen it all. That adds a unique difficulty.

I believe that democracy is important. It is important for people to be able to have access to their member of Parliament. Adding two RCMs would therefore create a democratic deficit. As well, another thing it is important to consider is that adding two RCMs that are not in the Gaspésie administrative region would be very problematic for the Magdalen Islands. That is not what we want, in terms of democracy.

• (1235)

Hon. Greg Fergus: My last question is for all four of you, since you have all talked about the importance of maintaining the representativeness of the Lower St. Lawrence region.

What would the consequences of eliminating a riding be?

How can we really represent the people of a large region with very few inhabitants?

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I have sent my colleagues a picture of the territory. As we know, a picture is worth a thousand words.

If you look at the picture, you will quickly and easily understand that the present territory, which still exists and is spread over thousands of square kilometres, had seven members of Parliament in 1960. Today, however, it has only three, and yet the members have to do the same work and they are now being asked to be just as effective in representing the regions within an enormous territory.

You can certainly understand that when the time comes to represent our constituents, we do not all have access to a helicopter or a limousine.

The Chair: Thank you.

I know that other members would have liked to answer the question, but they can do so in the second round of questions.

Mr. Therrien, the floor is now yours for six minutes.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to welcome my colleagues who are here to testify before the committee.

I am going to take 30 seconds to say that I went to my colleagues' region when the commissioners met with the public. I went to Percé, Matane and Rimouski. Unfortunately, I didn't go farther, but that must not be held against me. All that people talked about was losing a riding. Everyone was talking about it, whether they were people from the riding represented by Ms. Lebouthillier or from Mr. Blanchette-Joncas' or Ms. Michaud's riding. Everyone had the same opinion on the subject. So I was a bit surprised, since I am not hearing the same thing from everyone here, even though the public talked about nothing else.

Ms. Michaud, I have a lot of questions to ask you about how the territory is occupied and about services to the public, but I don't have a lot of speaking time.

What would the consequences be if a riding in your region were to disappear?

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you for your question.

As I briefly mentioned, our fears relate to the delivery of services to the public. Where we are, it isn't like in a city. In Montreal, for example, there is an MP's office on one corner, a Service Canada office on another, and a Passport Canada office on another. Outside the urban centres, we have suffered closing after closing. Because very few federal services remain in the territory, our riding offices have become extensions of federal services.

In my riding, for example, I have four constituency offices. Of the 338 MPs in Canada, very few have four constituency offices. The reason there are so many in my riding is that I didn't want my constituents to have to drive two or three hours to come to a single office and sign the form allowing access to their personal information, in order to move their case forward with the federal government.

These kinds of considerations have to be taken into account. If we eliminate one riding, it will enlarge the other two, but their member's office budgets will not necessarily be increased. Yes, there will be a small surplus for the additional territory or population, but it will be far from sufficient to pay for an additional office, let alone an additional salary.

That has to be taken into consideration. Since 2019, we have managed to help more than 1,200 people. When people called the federal government and got no answers to their questions, or when the Service Canada office was closed—it is open once a month, we are the ones they came to see, and we are the ones who helped them.

I want to mention that this is fundamentally important in terms of the occupation of the territory. When we took that argument to the Commission, it replied that as compared to other ridings, like Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou or Kenora in Ontario, which have hundreds of square kilometres...

Fifteen thousand square miles is not very much. I have provided you with maps that show that in the ridings of Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine and Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, the population, represented by dots, is spread throughout the territory. There are a few main roads, and so we have to drive to go and meet our constituents. However, if you look at the map of the riding

of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, you see that the population is primarily concentrated in Val-d'Or. A few communities of a few hundred inhabitants are spread around here and there, but the community is primarily concentrated in Val-d'Or. So there is a fundamental difference between the two.

We go out to meet our constituents. There are 56 mayors in my riding. If I want to meet one municipal council a week, it will take me more than a year to do it. Obviously, we also have to meet with other organizations in each municipality.

I am going to stop here, because I know the member has other questions to ask.

● (1240)

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you for your answer.

Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, people who know you know that you care about your region, to put it mildly.

I would like to hear your comments on the loss of political weight that your region will suffer if you lose a federal representative.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Mr. Therrien.

I think I was fairly direct in my statement. I was also direct in my answer to Mr. Fergus' question.

Obviously, this would be an enormous loss. How can we imagine being as effective for the same territory? I understand the population is smaller, but apart from the mathematical calculation, there is a territory, there is a surface area, there are hours of driving that have to be done.

I reiterate: there were seven federal members in 1960. In 1997, that number was reduced to four in eastern Quebec. Now, the 2022 redistribution proposal wants to give us three. But there are still the same tens of thousands of kilometres to travel. I reiterate: we don't have planes, we don't have helicopters. We travel around the territory by car. Most of the time, our assistants come with us, and sometimes it is volunteers who help us do our work. Reducing the number of representatives in that territory would therefore have enormous consequences.

How are we supposed to stimulate regional development, the development of our territory, when people who are there to support the economic, social and cultural development of those territories are being taken away from us?

How can a region move forward when it is constantly being pulled backward? It's inconceivable.

To add to what I said, I will also say that the loss of geographic identity is another factor. Mr. Généreux alluded to this when he talked about the fact that the RCM of Rivière-du-Loup has been removed from the new proposed name. I don't want to start a debate about riding names, but I believe you know that when an RCM is no longer included in a redistribution proposal, its RCM name is erased, and it is difficult for that RCM to feel that it belongs.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blanchette-Joncas.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours.

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

I thank all the members for being here today to testify. Of course, I'm a member of Parliament from British Columbia, but I represent a very rural riding. It's a huge area. People are dispersed all over it. I don't get to stay in one large community and visit and just go out occasionally. I spend a lot of time on the road travelling—on boats, on ferries and sometimes in waterplanes, depending on the situation. I really hear what you're saying about the need to not have people travel too far away and the fact that often an MP's office is like a service provider. If the MP's office isn't there, it means that people can't access services or they have to travel a long distance.

I appreciate that everyone is here to talk about the importance of this region and representation. All of you spoke about it directly. The first thing I want to get clear is this: Does everyone on this panel believe there should be four and not three ridings?

The second part of my question I will leave open to all of you. There was also mention from every person testifying here today that, looking forward, the commission should look at rural communities and how to understand them in a different way. What do you think the commission should consider? What should we be promoting, future forward, in honouring the fact that we have such a large country, with many very remote areas that have unique stories? If we don't have voices in Parliament to share those stories, it creates a weakness, not only for those regions in terms of political strength, but also for the strength of our whole country.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: If I may, I would like to start.

Thank you for your question. I see that you have a clear understanding of our rural reality.

Mr. Blanchette-Joncas described it well just now. About every ten years, our region, eastern Quebec, loses some feathers. The commissioners often use the ten-year census argument and the demographic decline reported in the regions of Quebec outside urban centres.

We know there is the provision concerning the Senate in the Constitution Act, 1867, for example, but we should perhaps consider a provision for the regions, to enable regions like ours to retain a reasonable number of votes in the House of Commons.

If we look to what has happened in recent years and what may occur, can we conclude that in ten years there will be no members left in eastern Quebec? Ten years later, will there be only one member, while there are 100 members in downtown Montreal?

Representativeness has to be considered when decisions like this are being made. Maybe, also, the entire region, rather than one riding, should be granted special status.

• (1245)

Mr. Bernard Généreux: If I may, I would like to point out that we learned yesterday that there are one million more Canadians in Canada. These people have mostly settled in the major centres, and not really outside those centres. I believe that in the future, the

Commission will have to consider effective regional representativeness, because it will become humanly difficult to represent people properly. Ms. Blaney, you said that you also represent a rural riding. Of course, when it is possible to travel around one's riding by bicycle or even on foot, in some cases, the situation is not the same in human terms. I want to be clear: I am talking here about the human capacity to represent people properly.

Given this, all we can do today is make only minor changes to the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act, because it has been passed. The Commission does not have the power to change the act. However, we, as parliamentarians, have the power to change the next version of the act. That is what your committee should be focusing on, to guarantee humanly acceptable regional representativeness.

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: To add to what my colleague has just said, when we passed the most recent act, we were assured, in Quebec, that the 78 ridings would be protected. However, I don't think any of us thought that the electoral boundaries were going to change. When we look at a riding like mine, even if the population doubled in five or ten years, a member would be able to serve it properly.

However, what is being proposed now will make the job impossible for the next generation of members, because I am also thinking of them, the people who will come after us. It will require that the next MPs not have spouses or children, and travel around in a trailer or a fifth wheel, because they will never be able to be home. They will be spending their time driving around the territory. You mentioned that where you come from, there were ferries. As I said, to get to the Magdalen Islands by ferry, you have to go through two provinces: first New Brunswick, then Prince Edward Island, to get to Souris. There really are unique difficulties in the regions outside urban centres.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you for your question, Ms. Blaney. It is fundamental: does the Canada Elections Act, at present, allow for real representativeness of the political weight and voice of the regions of Canada, even in Quebec?

I believe this situation clearly shows that this is not the case. It is a matter of inhabiting the territory; do we all want to live in condo buildings, or do we really want to live in the territory and develop it?

That is the question.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are going to continue with Mr. Gourde, Ms. Romanado and, for a few minutes, Mr. Therrien and Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Gourde, the floor is yours for three and a half minutes to four minutes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank my colleagues for doing a good job of representing their ridings.

I have been lucky to visit all of the territory very often to make government announcements on behalf of Canada Economic Development. I am very familiar with your territory and your reality.

Where I come from, it was the opposite. I had to give away half of my territory to my neighbour who is sitting beside me, because our territory is the victim of its own success: it had too many people. Unfortunately, I had to give away municipalities with which I had maintained very close ties for 17 years. At the hearings, I had to suggest new boundaries to the commissioners that reflected my situation after that redistribution better.

At the hearings that were held last fall, did you propose a new map that would have allowed you to retain your territory? It really is a game of dominoes. To keep the four ridings in your region, the map of proposals has to be changed.

Did you do that exercise?

• (1250)

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: We learned about it in early August. Everyone was on vacation. In the Gaspé region and the Magdalen Islands, that is the season when people are on vacation, or it is when they are working the most. Everyone is working, particularly in the fishing and tourism industries. It was impossible to get in touch with the mayors and wardens.

I fell out of my chair when I learned that the Commission was starting its consultations in our region on September 6. It was impossible for people to get organized.

That is why we are coming back today with proposals, a Plan B. Certainly, for me, Plan A would be the status quo, but given the 78 ridings and the political decisions we made, there has to be a Plan B.

The proposed Plan B is to bring the RCM of Avignon back into Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine and so be able to respond to what the Commission is asking for in relation to electoral representation.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: If I may, I am going to add a comment. I got in touch with all the wardens in the Gaspé region and the Lower St. Lawrence and they and I were present in Gaspé on September 6 and in Matane on September 7. The solution was to keep the map as it stands.

You have to have 78 ridings in Quebec. You can arrange them as you like, but for eastern Quebec, we are proposing that the four ridings be preserved. That is what everyone asked for.

As far as community support, we are fortunate to be able to send householders to our constituents about once a month. I sent one out that arrived at homes at the beginning of the week. By a few days later, I had already received over 600 little pieces of paper that people sent me to tell me they agreed with our proposal: asking for the status quo. They cited many reasons, in particular the loss of services to the public and everything I mentioned earlier.

So Plan A is still on the table. It is still a priority for us. For all the mayors and prefects in the Gaspé region and the Lower St. Lawrence, who I know are watching us, the priority is also to ask for the status quo.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: If I may, Mr. Gourde, I want to add a comment.

We say that democracy is important. That is not just a slogan. Democracy means listening to the will of the electors whom we are representing today. Those electors have unanimously asked that the status quo be retained.

You don't think about a Plan B when you practise democracy by listening to the voice and will of the people we represent.

The Chair: Bravo!

Ms. Romanado, you have four minutes.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank my colleagues for their presentations. Honestly, I know this is not an easy subject for members from Quebec, given the first proposal and what has happened. I therefore congratulate you on your efforts because this issue has direct consequences for your constituents.

I am going to give you a bit of time to conclude, because it is not always easy to argue one's case in three minutes, that being the time you are allowed. So I would like to give each of you an extra minute to conclude and add a few comments before we go on to the others.

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: When we talk about the elected representatives from our region, they obviously prefer Plan A, preserving the status quo in order to retain the four ridings. However, I took the time to find out what people thought about Plan B, because another option had to be presented.

Personally, I really am going to defend the boundaries of my riding, in order to represent my constituents. That is part of my responsibilities. People also supported the option I presented to them: to attach Avignon to our riding. In fact, ten years ago, Avignon was part of the riding of Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine. People told me that this felt to them like a homecoming.

• (1255)

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Ms. Romanado.

The question is open, so we have the space needed for exploring it in depth.

I am going to try not to go back over what has already been said. We actually have pretty much exhausted certain subjects.

I can tell you that in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region, which I proudly represent, people are proud to live in their territory. They rolled up their sleeves in recent years, because the region was experiencing a loss of vitality.

One aspect that has not been mentioned today is the accelerated aging of the population. In the Lower St. Lawrence, one person out of four is aged 65 or over. In 20 years, it will be one person in three.

I represent the people of the RCM of Les Basques, where one in two people is aged 60 or over. Imagine how difficult it is to keep people in the region and develop it when there are so many people who are not in the labour force. It is reasonable for these people to be opting to retire, but how are we going stem the decline of a territory when the actors there, like us, its members of Parliament, are unable to work efficiently?

We are currently having to deal with numerous constraints. The Bas-Saint-Laurent, Gaspésie and Îles-de-la-Madeleine regions are a living laboratory. Today, those regions are targeted by electoral redistribution. I don't want to be a prophet of doom, but I guarantee you that other regions of Quebec and even from all over Canada will experience the same fate over the next few years.

The idea of occupation of the territory is therefore crucial. How do we want to develop this? Do we just want people to settle in places with no infrastructure, where there is little access to technology and local services?

It is difficult to develop at the same pace and in the same way as major urban centres do.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I am going to continue and come back to the householder I mentioned a few moments ago.

We asked people why they opposed the elimination of the riding and were asking for the status quo in eastern Quebec.

These are the reasons they gave us: the loss of services to the public; too much distance to travel to the MP's office; loss of personal interest in democracy; loss of our political weight in Ottawa; more difficulty accessing federal financial resources; and greater power in the major centres at the expense of regions outside those centres.

That is what the people where I come from told us.

Mr. Bernard Généreux: I have a logical mind and I like to respect everyone's roles, including our roles as members of Parliament. We had an act to pass and we passed it.

Today, we are appearing before a committee that ordinarily makes minor rather than major changes. Certainly the status quo would have been ideal. However, knowing that the ridings on Montreal Island had to be redistributed, the commissioners did their job.

Of course we would have liked to retain the status quo in eastern Quebec, because everyone told us the same thing on that subject. Opinion was unanimous. However, I am not a dreamer. I have a logical mind, and, I would reiterate, the commissioners have a job to do. Their role is not to change the law; it is to apply it.

We would have liked the law to be different. However, being an optimist by nature, I believe we will have the next ten years to make sure the next electoral map is different and is designed on the basis of a new act, to be organized around the people who live in the regions of Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Therrien, the floor is yours.

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a brief question for Ms. Michaud.

The RCM of La Matanie is in your riding. However, I understood from what Ms. Lebouthillier said that you would like that region to be attached to Rimouski rather than to the Gaspé.

It is your RCM and your world. What do people tell you? What are their priorities?

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Obviously, all of the elected representatives who appeared before the Commission said they wanted the status quo. The commissioners then asked the regional elected representatives whether, if they could not get that, they preferred to be on the Rimouski side or the Gaspé side.

The regional elected representatives—the warden of La Matanie and the mayor of Matane—said that if they had to choose, they would prefer to be with the Gaspé, because it was more natural to do business with that region. That is the reason the commissioners also gave when they said they wanted to move La Matanie over to Gaspé, because it was what was wanted in the region.

So I find it hard to explain why Ms. Lebouthillier wanted to go against the wishes of the elected representatives yesterday.

● (1300)

Mr. Alain Therrien: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Blaney is next.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I have no questions. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney, you know the way to my heart. Thank you for that.

With that, I would like to thank our colleagues for coming to us and sharing these comments. If you have anything else to add, please send it to the clerk. She will share it with members.

Members, I wish all of you a good day.

Members of PROC, I will just let you know that next week we will be continuing with redistribution in Quebec. The clerk has divided that into about five panels. We're going to have two panels on Tuesday and two panels on Thursday.

Tuesday is budget day, and the lock-up might have a bit of an overlap. I have asked, wherever I can, if there is a way to have about a 15-minute window for people coming from committee to be able to get into the lock-up. If the lock-up closes at one o'clock and our committee ends at one, it would be really nice for them to accommodate our work, because we are doing work that is legislated.

That's just a heads-up. I will keep you informed. As I get information, I will give you information.

Go ahead, Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Just very briefly, do you think maybe the clerk could send us out a bit of that work plan for the next few weeks, to—

The Chair: We're just working on it. A document was already sent out showing everyone who's coming, and it gives you a sense of regions. As the clerk is confirming, they're going to send out invitations tonight. The challenge, though, is that when we're sending out information that is changing in real time, it's hard to know which is the current document.

Let's just give them a minute to send out invitations, and then they will send you some stuff.

Mr. John Nater: Absolutely. I appreciate that.

The other studies are also ongoing, as those are able to be confirmed. I just want kind of a forward-looking document, so we can see what's coming down the pike and plan internally.

The Chair: Yes. We will definitely be working on that.

I'll just say, Mrs. Blaney, for the motion you've put on notice—and I know it's just on notice—there are some translation issues. I also notice the date of April 24. I think some of it is a matter of making sure the schedules are possible, because we still have to move it, and we still have to then work it.

I appreciate the prescription that's been coming with motions lately, but I would also like to remind members that if I understand the intent of the committee, we'll always try to deliver it. Having a bit of leniency does help us. We'll figure that stuff out and get you some information.

We'll see you next week. Have a good day. Keep well and safe.

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