



Province of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, December 5, 2017

Day 61

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 29th Legislature

Third Session

Wanner, Hon. Robert E., Medicine Hat (NDP), Speaker
Jabbour, Deborah C., Peace River (NDP), Deputy Speaker and Chair of Committees
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP), Deputy Chair of Committees

Aheer, Leela Sharon, Chestermere-Rocky View (UCP),
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Anderson, Wayne, Highwood (UCP)
Babcock, Erin D., Stony Plain (NDP)
Barnes, Drew, Cypress-Medicine Hat (UCP)
Bilous, Hon. Deron, Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview (NDP)
Carlier, Hon. Oneil, Whitecourt-Ste. Anne (NDP)
Carson, Jonathon, Edmonton-Meadowlark (NDP)
Ceci, Hon. Joe, Calgary-Fort (NDP)
Clark, Greg, Calgary-Elbow (AP)
Connolly, Michael R.D., Calgary-Hawthood (NDP)
Coolahan, Craig, Calgary-Klein (NDP)
Cooper, Nathan, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills (UCP)
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Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South West (NDP)
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Fitzpatrick, Maria M., Lethbridge-East (NDP)
Fraser, Rick, Calgary-South East (Ind)
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Gill, Prab, Calgary-Greenway (UCP),
Official Opposition Deputy Whip
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP)
Gotfried, Richard, Calgary-Fish Creek (UCP)
Gray, Hon. Christina, Edmonton-Mill Woods (NDP)
Hanson, David B., Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills (UCP)
Hinkley, Bruce, Wetaskiwin-Camrose (NDP)
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Official Opposition Deputy House Leader
Renaud, Marie F., St. Albert (NDP)
Rosendahl, Eric, West Yellowhead (NDP)
Sabir, Hon. Irfan, Calgary-McCall (NDP)
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Starke, Dr. Richard, Vermilion-Lloydminster (PC)
Stier, Pat, Livingstone-Macleod (UCP)
Strankman, Rick, Drumheller-Stettler (UCP)
Sucha, Graham, Calgary-Shaw (NDP)
Swann, Dr. David, Calgary-Mountain View (AL)
Taylor, Wes, Battle River-Wainwright (UCP)
Turner, Dr. A. Robert, Edmonton-Whitemud (NDP)
van Dijken, Glenn, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock (UCP)
Westhead, Cameron, Banff-Cochrane (NDP),
Deputy Government Whip
Woollard, Denise, Edmonton-Mill Creek (NDP)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UCP)
Vacant, Calgary-Lougheed

Party standings:

New Democratic: 54 United Conservative: 26 Alberta Party: 2 Alberta Liberal: 1 Progressive Conservative: 1 Independent: 2 Vacant: 1

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Anderson, W.	Kleinsteinuber
Babcock	McKitrick
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Hanson	Rosendahl
Kazim	Woollard
Kleinsteinuber	

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, December 5, 2017

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: Please be seated.

Government Motions

Adjournment of Fall Session

35. Mr. Mason moved:

Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 3(9) the Third Session of the 29th Legislature 2017 fall sitting of the Assembly be extended beyond the first Thursday in December until such time as or when the Government House Leader advises the Assembly that the business for the sitting is concluded, and at such time the Assembly stands adjourned.

[Government Motion 35 carried]

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 33

Electoral Divisions Act

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Mason: I move second reading of Bill 33, the Electoral Divisions Act.

Madam Speaker, Bill 33 comes about as the result of an independent commission which conducted an extensive review of Alberta's electoral map, received a great many written and oral submissions from Albertans, and ultimately put forward its recommendations. As members are no doubt aware, the commission recommended the creation of three new electoral divisions and the consolidation of three areas that have seen below-average population growth over the last eight years.

Certainly, many people on both sides of the House believe that the Electoral Boundaries Commission could have found a less disruptive way to make the changes that it ultimately recommended. I know there will be many resulting challenges, especially with respect to rural representation. However, we believe that the alternative of having politicians set their own boundaries rather than having an independent panel doing it would not be productive or appropriate.

While we may not agree with everything in the report, ultimately it's important to remember that the seats in the Assembly belong to Albertans and not to any one MLA or any one political party. It is for that reason that last week the government presented a motion to concur in the report. That motion was approved on the evening of November 28 with some amendments to boundary names, and it is for that reason that the government is now introducing Bill 33.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It is a pleasure to rise on this glorious evening.

An Hon. Member: Glorious.

Mr. Cooper: Glorious. Simply marvellous.

In the long, time-honoured tradition of my colleague from Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, I'd just like to say good night to Porter and Paxton and Peyton. I hope you have a great sleep. Dad will be home soon, and by soon I mean sometime next week, by the looks of things.

You know, Madam Speaker, Bill 33, the Electoral Divisions Act, is a very important piece of legislation, as many things that we discuss here in the Assembly are, but there are some significant challenges. The Government House Leader just rose and identified how we arrived here. I want to begin by thanking the members of the Electoral Boundaries Commission for their hard work and their service to Albertans. Those five individuals gave up a lot of their time, talent, and energy to produce the final report as well as the draft report and to do some real public consultation. That work was important and diligent work.

Having said that, just because important and diligent work has been done, it doesn't mean that we arrived at the right conclusion. I think there are a number of factors at play that should provide enough reason to not accept Bill 33. It was one of the reasons why I voted against the government motion that was before us last week or the week before, because I am of the opinion that we haven't struck the right balance, particularly in respect to rural Alberta and the negative impacts that it will have on rural Alberta.

I might just add that Commissioner Gwen Day, who provided a minority report, highlights some of those concerns. Particularly in the constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, that I have the absolute honour and pleasure of representing, as you know, Madam Speaker, I have heard from numerous individuals who have expressed this significant concern. I'd like to walk through some of those concerns this evening and encourage members of the Assembly to carefully consider the ramifications of making the decision to accept the legislation.

I want to remind members that we each have a responsibility and a duty to Albertans, and I want to remind particular members of the government caucus that represent rural Alberta of the negative consequences that this particular piece of legislation will have over a long period of time for not just rural Alberta but all of Alberta. All voices around this mosaic that we call Alberta are critically important, and that includes those voices in rural Alberta. You'll know, Madam Speaker, that as a result of the report and, I would submit to you, the inaccurate decision that the commission made to weigh the variance of population as more important than effective representation, this decision that the justice and the majority on the commission made to not accurately reflect these very important Supreme Court guided parameters around effective representation, I would encourage members of the Assembly to not accept Bill 33 and to vote against it.

Too often, unfortunately, the right to effective representation is confused with the concept of equality of voting power. They are two very separate things, Madam Speaker. Inside the legislation that provides the boundary commission with the guidance they are to base their decisions upon, there is this allowance for a variance of electoral divisions, that of 25 per cent more or less than the average of the proposed electoral division. What we wound up with are some very, very challenging impacts of this decision and, certainly, Justice Bielby's commitment to get to what she referred to as voter parity, which is this concept of one person, one vote.

I think that Commissioner Day made a very compelling case in the minority report that this parameter of one person, one vote isn't a Canadian concept. It's not outlined in any overarching piece of legislation. In fact, you can go as far back as the founding fathers of our country, when they spoke to the fact that variance was reasonable and acceptable. We all have different roles here in the

Chamber, Madam Speaker, and when we make a decision based solely on population, we could have just done that in a spreadsheet. We could have just made a very cold, calculated decision based upon straight-up numbers.

I think you'll find that in the urban areas the commission did quite a good job of getting as close to that number of zero as possible. It's unfortunate that in Calgary and Edmonton we see the vast majority of the variances and certainly, in Edmonton's case, the vast majority of them being under 6 per cent variance and in many cases under the average population of the electoral districts. Yet we see in constituencies like Bonnyville-Cold Lake a 15 per cent population variance above. So not only do you have challenges with the representation of the size of the constituency, the number of schools, school boards, municipalities . . . [interjections]

7:40

The Acting Speaker: Hon members, just a reminder that we are in second reading, not Committee of the Whole. If we could please respect the member who is speaking.

Mr. Cooper: I will, Madam Speaker, do my very best to be exponentially more engaging in the remainder of my remarks.

When I think about how I may better engage the members opposite, one thing I do know for certain is that there are a number of members opposite that share some of my concerns. I have had conversations on the highways and byways of the legislative precincts – for the record that was good for engaging, the highways and byways – about this very issue, that many members on that side of the Chamber feel like rural Alberta perhaps didn't get a fair shake because of this commitment to population parity. So we see all across rural Alberta negative impacts from just that.

I think that it's important that we consider the report in its entirety and, as such, the legislation in its entirety. Madam Speaker, there are other options available to the Assembly than just accepting it because the report has been placed before us. We could strike a new commission. We could delay the commission past the next general election, as, I might add, was the recommendation of the Official Opposition from the beginning of this process. We all know that the commissions were compressed together because of the closeness of time between general elections. We actually had some opportunity to delay it. If we were to say no now, we could push past and either have a new commission after the next general election or potentially accept these results after the next general election, including sending the commission back out.

One thing I think you will find is that the draft report and the final report were extremely different reports. A case could be made that the final report was so different from the draft that we ought to have consulted on the effectiveness of the draft report as well. Now, unfortunately, there aren't the parameters within the conditions which the commission had to operate under for that to happen. As you know, Madam Speaker, the Legislative Assembly is the master of its own domain, and we have the opportunity to provide guidance, if we want, to the commission, and we could have provided them the tools and the resources to ensure that they could go back and take the draft and find out exactly what Albertans were expecting.

You know, Madam Speaker, when it comes to effective representation, it's important, particularly in rural Alberta, that Albertans have equal access to their member as well. You know that I represent the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, and under the new report that outstanding constituency will grow in size by approximately a third and will be close to 300 kilometres from one corner to the next.

Let me be very clear. I'm more than happy to do that work, to drive the kilometres, to see the people, but when you compare that to an urban riding, the amount of travel time, the amount of engagement that's possible are significantly reduced. As such, some people in Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills may feel that they don't have the same sort of access or effective representation as they would with an urban MLA, which has been my long-held opinion as well as the opinion of Commissioner Day. We should, in fact, be using the 25 per cent population variances in the cities so that we can have more opportunity in the rural areas to disperse those rural MLAs so that rural Albertans have equal and effective representation in their constituencies as well. I think that it is very critical to the success of our province that rural Alberta continues to be strong and vibrant and successful.

The large physical demographics of rural ridings: it is nearly impossible for rural MLAs, particularly in some of the constituencies – one I know the Deputy Speaker represents – to effectively represent those areas. I know that my colleague from Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre from time to time will ask this question of individuals, particularly out in the rural areas – sometimes we'll even do events together in the city, and I hear him ask this question, Madam Speaker: what is the difference between a rural MLA and an urban MLA? Some would say better looking. I'm not sure that that is . . .

Mrs. Aheer: Miles. Distance.

Mr. Cooper: Miles. Distance. That's another good guess.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre will tell you that the difference between a rural MLA and an urban MLA is that a rural MLA has to have toilet paper in their truck because there are significant distances and you never know. You always need to be prepared. If you're an urban MLA, that's never a problem. You are always very close to your next stop.

I think that these are the sorts of – well, that's a humorous example of some of the differences, but there are some very real challenges that exist in rural Alberta. The commission, in my opinion, certainly hasn't taken into consideration those challenges and those concerns. In fact, in the draft report the majority on the commission actually recommended or said that it might be possible that rural MLAs would be able to hire a driver so that they could do more work while travelling the great distances that they travel. Now, I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that the good folks of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills would not look too keenly on their member having a driver. I know that the government is into job creation and growing government jobs, but I don't think that this is the best path forward for that. We need to consider these very unique differences between urban and rural Alberta and ensure that rural MLAs are able to effectively represent their constituents and keep that voice strong.

One of the other things that you'll find, Madam Speaker, is that in urban areas it's quite possible to have MLAs that are more interchangeable than in rural Alberta. While each MLA brings their own unique personality and perspective to their role, if the chamber of commerce in Calgary is holding an event that may or may not actually even be in their constituency, an urban MLA may attend on behalf of elected officials whereas in rural Alberta that presents more of a significant challenge because members of the constituency really have a personal connection to their MLA and would like to see them, whether it's at a graduation or a chamber lunch or otherwise. As much as the good people of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills might love to see the Member for Livingstone-Macleod at an event, it is certainly not the same type of personal connection that rural Alberta appreciates or would like to see.

7:50

It's been well documented that despite variances in larger populations, those urban MLAs are often in a better position to represent their constituents because of their collective, shared responsibility with other MLAs and the lack of distance from their actual constituency.

As we move forward, you know, I think there is a responsibility of all members of the Assembly to ensure that we are doing our very best to protect the interests of all Albertans, and that means ensuring that we have effective representation all across the province. This is a concept, as I mentioned, that is enshrined by case law in the Supreme Court. I think that Commissioner Day did a great job in the minority report of laying out a lot of those facts.

I would encourage members on the other side to think carefully about what options we may have as an Assembly to ensure that we respect both urban and rural Albertans. I know that there are members of the other side that voted with the opposition against the motion because they have some real reservations, and that's a great thing. I think that in a free and open Legislature we should look at what's best, not just for our constituency but for Alberta as a whole. A strong rural Alberta means a strong Alberta. We need strength in both urban and rural, and having that sort of representation in rural Alberta is critical to the success of our province.

I think you'll agree, Madam Speaker, that at AAMD and C just a few weeks ago they passed a motion at their biannual conference to enshrine some of – or calling upon the government to not accept the boundaries commission report, to not proceed with the weakening of democracy in rural Alberta but to stand strong and represent the very unique and important needs of rural Alberta.

I think that we should also be having a large conversation around: how are we going to ensure that Alberta remains strong and robust? Over a long period of time we can expect that in rural Alberta some areas – well, certainly we have declining populations, and in the cities those populations will quite likely continue to increase. If we don't stop this shift of the urbanization of our Assembly, we run the risk long term of presenting some real challenges to the strength of our democracy. I think that that's an important conversation that we as an Assembly should have at some point in time.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Don't forget Taber. Okay.

Madam Speaker, it's my pleasure to be able to rise to speak to this bill and talk about this Electoral Boundaries Commission report and some of the concerns that I have with it. I'd just like to, first of all, start out by telling you about a situation that I encountered last week with an MLA from the NDP side. We were at a mayors and reeves meeting, and presented to the mayors and reeves was that this NDP MLA felt that she needed to vote in favour of this because the report was done and she had no choice but to vote for this.

Now, I just want to speak to this issue. From what I understand, the commission's responsibility or mandate was to write the report. It's not their responsibility to make sure that it gets passed or that it doesn't get passed. So it's our responsibility to take a look at that report and find out whether or not it works for us individually in our ridings and for the people who we represent.

Now, I know that there are many members on the opposite side who are rural MLAs and try to represent their constituents to the best of their ability. Here's the problem. The problem is that from listening to this MLA, it sounded like she was either told or under the belief that they must vote for this bill. They must vote in favour of this bill. So I was looking forward to the opportunity to be able

to say to all of the members opposite that the mandate of the commission has been fulfilled in the writing of this report. The mandate that is on your shoulders as MLAs is to find out whether or not this works for you in your individual ridings and whether or not you should be voting for this.

I believe that if we take it on that merit, we will be in a situation where we have the opportunity to really see this for what it is, which is a disenfranchising of rural Alberta. At the AAMD and C conference, if you were there – and I know that a lot of members opposite were there, which I'm grateful that they actually went to these stakeholder outreaches and talked with the people. I heard it over and over again there that if these MLAs were to vote for this bill, they would see it as a slap on rural Alberta's face and that they would see this as disenfranchising rural Alberta and that they would not take kindly to this.

You know, we saw the same thing happen with Bill 6. With Bill 6 the government side of the House was new, and I think that had they had the kind of experience that they have now, I do not believe that especially a lot of the rural MLAs would have voted in favour of that bill. When they saw how upset rural Alberta was about Bill 6, I think that what would happen is that with the experience that they have now, they would have voted against Bill 6.

Getting back to this bill ...

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, a reminder: second reading, not Committee of the Whole.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just want to point out that in my opinion you've got the strengths and the weaknesses of this, and I think that each MLA needs to ask themselves: what are the strengths of this, and what are the weaknesses of this?

We've got three new ridings that are going to be introduced. We have one in Edmonton, one in Calgary, and one in Airdrie. Now, if polls are maintained at the same levels that they are right now, I would have to say that the NDP have the chance of getting one of those three.

An Hon. Member: How about three?

Mr. Hunter: I'm glad you're so, you know, enthusiastic at this late hour, but the polls have been fairly consistent. So I would say that 1 out of those 3 they have a chance, a possible chance, of being able to win.

What is the cost that they are trading, you know, that kind of potential gain? The cost is that I also know that a lot of the MLAs on that side have been working really hard in their ridings. I've actually heard of people who actually get out there. They knock on doors. They try to engage with the stakeholders. Now, here's what they give up. What they give up, especially in Calgary and Edmonton – Calgary is obviously going to be where the battle lines are drawn. They've been working in their specific areas, and now all of Calgary is redrawn. So the MLAs that have been working hard there now have to go into the next election without having the ability to work. They have maybe a year, year and a half to be able to work on the new boundaries. Now, everybody is going to have to deal with that, obviously, but if I was an MLA from the NDP side, I would have to ask myself: am I giving up way too much cost for a very minute and small gain? Taking a look at it, I can't see how they would see this as a benefit to them.

8:00

I will say this much. If you take a look at a heat map and the heat map represents where people voted in the 2015 general election, you know, I can see why they drew the boundaries the way they did. But, once again, based upon the polling information that we

have, I don't think that those heat maps can actually be taken seriously. So I would have to say that once again I don't think that this government or the members opposite have been taking a serious look at what they are giving up for a small gain.

You know, once again, I want to go back to the original point, and that is that the mandate of the commission was to write the report. They did that. The mandate of each individual MLA in here is to be able to just vote yes or no on that report. They are not mandated to vote yes for that report, if I understand it correctly. However, listening to one of the MLAs on the other side, it would seem that that was what was presented to the MLAs, especially the backbench MLAs, on the NDP side. I wanted to make sure that it was on *Hansard* and it was publicly stated that in no uncertain terms is it ever mandated for any of the NDP MLAs to vote in favour of this, other than maybe you're being whipped to do it. Now, if that's the case, that's one thing, but it didn't seem like they were being whipped to be able to do this. What it seemed like was that they felt that they had no choice because of the way the report was written. They had to vote for it. They had no other choice. I wanted to make that point very clear.

Now, taking a look at some of the good points that were made in the minority report, it talks about the mandate of the commission. They had to take into consideration, obviously, population. There's no doubt that that was supposed to be taken into consideration. But, as some of my other colleagues have already pointed out, when you take a look at the way that they distributed the population, it seemed like they took into consideration Calgary and Edmonton, really trying to make sure that it was close and there was no deviation from the norm. They tried to go as close to that as possible. In fact, a lot of the Edmonton seats that I saw were plus or minus one or two.

Now, as a rural MLA I will say this much. From one end of my riding to another end of my riding it takes me almost three hours to drive. In the first iteration, the first draft, they had split my riding up into two ridings. There was an eastern part and a western part to the riding. In the first iteration the riding was called Taber-Vulcan, and it was interesting because this riding's boundaries went from about 20 minutes east of Calgary down to the southeast corner of Alberta.

Now, we took a look at this first iteration, and we thought: how in heaven's name can any MLA represent that many communities? Now, I understand that in northern Alberta there aren't as many communities, so I understand how they can be a lot bigger, but in southern Alberta that would have represented, I believe, four MDs and about 40 different communities of varying sizes. I can tell you that it would be impossible. So we wrote and talked to the commission and told them that this was unacceptable.

In the second iteration, the final report, that we received, all they did is that they took Taber-Vulcan and they made that into Taber-Warner. Now, that riding is actually a lot easier to be able to circumnavigate and get around, but what they did is that they then made it into the Cardston-Kainai riding, which takes it again from about 20 minutes outside of Calgary right down to the south border, just south of Cardston. Once again, this riding, with the way that the boundaries were developed, looks like an hourglass, and the reality is that once again I believe there's over 36 communities in this riding.

Each of these communities wants to have their own events that they would like to see their MLA come to, to be able to hear and talk with them, hear what their concerns are. Each of them has a council. Each of them has a mayor or a reeve, and they want their MLA to be able to come on a regular basis to be able to represent them. How do you represent that many communities properly? I have no doubt that it's going to be virtually impossible to do it effectively.

The mandate of this commission was very specific: to write the report. They did that. Many people in rural Alberta believe that they did that based upon the heat map that they took a look at to be able to find out how they could actually gerrymander this process for the NDP. [interjections] I'm just telling you that this is what they said.

Mr. Mason: Point of order.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, a point of order has been called.

Point of Order Reflections on Nonmembers

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I rise under Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j), particularly (j). There are a number of rulings that have been made from the chair in the past about reflections on people who are outside the House. The suggestion, whether it's a second-hand suggestion or a direct accusation, that in some way members of the commission were involved in gerrymandering is offensive, and it is a very bad reflection on the work that they did. We may not agree, and I think the hon. member is quite right that many members on both sides of the House disagree with some of the decisions in the report, but to suggest that it was done deliberately and with malice, in my view, is unacceptable. We ought not to show such serious disrespect for people who have undertaken a job on behalf of this Assembly and the people of Alberta.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. Government House Leader. The hon. Member for Calgary-Hays.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. What I just heard from the Government House Leader was pretty rich based on his argument earlier today about the statement in the House today from the Member for Edmonton-South West, combined with the number of times the members of the government use the name Jason Kenney in a disparaging way in this House. If you just consider that alone, his sudden sensitivity to talking about comments that other people have made is astounding. It's so astounding as to be incredulous, and if the Government House Leader was to consider his earlier... [interjections]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members. [interjections] Hon. members, we're speaking to a point of order, so if you could please wait. Thank you. We're lively this evening, I see. If we could please listen. We have a point of order on the floor right now, and the hon. Member for Calgary-Hays is trying to declare his argument. If I could please hear his argument, I would appreciate it.

Thank you.

The hon. member.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Government House Leader, if he actually heard what he said earlier today and then heard what he just said five minutes ago, would probably have a very red face and probably be ashamed of himself. On that basis alone – you know what? I think that we all need to be a little bit sensitive of each other's feelings here, but really what the hon. member was saying was certainly far less offensive than what the Leader of the Opposition defended vehemently not very many hours ago, on this very day, from that very seat.

8:10

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, at this point, I'm going to say that it's a dispute of the facts. Part of the struggle that we're having this evening is that I can't actually hear what the speakers are saying

because there's too much noise on both sides of the House. I would recommend that all members respect the fact that we're in second reading, respect the fact that as the Speaker I need to hear what our members are saying, and stick to the bill, please.

Hon. member, please continue.

Debate Continued

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will restate my point, and that is that the perception – the perception – that rural Alberta has of this slight is obviously not well received, so the NDP might want to consider the optics of what they're trying to gain from this. Once again, the issue is . . .

The Acting Speaker: Member, can you speak to the content of the bill, please, and not make any assumptions around perception?

Mr. Hunter: Let me finish what my point is. My point is this: we have three . . . [interjections]

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members.
Please continue.

Mr. Hunter: . . . seats that will be brought from rural Alberta into the urban setting, and of those three, according to polls, the NDP at this point have the chance of being able to win one of them. So the cost of the optics for the NDP is high versus what they're actually going to gain. That was the only point that I was trying to make with this. If I offended anybody on the other side, it was not my intention.

But let's carry on with the minority report and the concerns that were brought forward. Under the rights that we have in this democratic society, we have the right to . . . [Mr. Hunter's speaking time expired]

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing – oh. My apologies. We're on 29(2)(a).

Mr. McIver: We are on 29(2)(a)?

The Acting Speaker: Yes.

Mr. Nixon: He is on 29(2)(a)?

The Acting Speaker: Would anybody like to speak to 29(2)(a)? Oh. Okay.

Mr. Nixon: Thank you, Madam Speaker. That's what I thought you were originally offering, but I do appreciate the clarification.

Thank you to the hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner for his excellent presentation, particularly his attempt to explain, I think, in a very good way how rural Alberta feels about parts of this report. I think the facts are pretty clear, when you look at the report and have talked to people across the province, that this is impacting constituencies on all sides of the aisle and all parties that are currently inside this Legislature, particularly on the rural side. I suspect that my rural colleagues across the way, like myself, are hearing the same concerns from their constituents in rural Alberta. There are a lot of concerns, particularly around how communities have been impacted, communities that have traditionally been together, that have common economic corridors and relationships and situations like that.

The Government House Leader, actually, when introducing this bill just about an hour ago, articulated that. He actually made it very, very clear that there were problems with this report and that

he did not want to see this House gerrymandering ridings, which I agree with. I don't think that it is within our mandate as MLAs to try to redraw individual constituencies because of the conflict, which is why we use a committee to do that. But the Government House Leader was clear that there are problems with the report, and if there are problems with the report and the committee did get it wrong and has caused tremendous impact – I see the Minister of Service Alberta smiling about that, but she doesn't have a rural riding. She may not understand what is taking place in rural communities and what is upsetting them as a result of that.

I would like it if the hon. member could just expand a little bit on the frustration that is happening in rural Alberta.

Ms McLean: It was a grimace, not a smile.

Mr. Nixon: Okay. A grimace, then. Same thing.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, Minister.
The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Look, there is obviously frustration. I know the members opposite have heard it when they've gone to the AAMD and C. I'm not telling them something that they don't already know. The real question that we face here tonight is: will there be a win or a loss for rural Alberta? I don't think that the government gains anything from slighting rural Alberta, but this is a decision that they have to make.

In this situation I actually just wanted to make one other point here, Madam Speaker, and that is that in 1991 the Supreme Court in Saskatchewan stated that there can be a deviation up to 25 per cent and that that will not undermine section 3 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and that even in cities that deviation can happen.

Now, I've seen the maps. I saw certain iterations where they drew just Calgary and Edmonton, and they could make Calgary and Edmonton work within those deviations of 25 per cent higher or lower. Again, the way that the report was drafted seemed to take into consideration just Calgary and Edmonton when it came to those deviations. I think that whether it was intended or not, when rural Alberta takes a look at losing three seats out of rural Alberta, then they have to see this as a slight to them.

I've tried to speak to especially the member that was talking before when we were with the mayors and reeves, the NDP member, because she did seem like she felt that they had to vote for this. I do know that there were a couple that voted against but at great duress, from what I understand, to what they were told. Yet I think that there should be at least a majority of the rural MLAs that would say absolutely no to this report because it does slight rural Alberta.

There's lots more that I could talk about on this issue. Those people on the commission: I appreciate their efforts. This was a lot of work, and I think that we need to applaud them for the work that they did.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow.

Mr. Clark: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Good evening, everyone. Thank you very much, hon. colleagues. I'm rising to speak to Bill 33. I just want to start by reflecting on the process that got us to this point, the process that the Electoral Boundaries Commission went through, the two-stage process. There was a series of public hearings, at the very least eight if I'm not mistaken, an online submission process where Albertans could weigh in, and

a draft set of boundaries that were distributed. Albertans then had an opportunity to weigh in on that with another series of hearings and a tour around the province, rural and urban, another opportunity to provide input in person and online, and ultimately the report was finalized.

[Mr. Sucha in the chair]

I just want to remind the House – I'm sure you all know this – that the commission was made up of two members appointed by the government, two members appointed by the Official Opposition, chaired by a Provincial Court judge. The process itself, I think, should be respected, and we need to understand that the process, at least ostensibly, ought to be a nonpartisan process. I will say that, yes, we have two members appointed by the government, but two members appointed by the Official Opposition.

Now, it's worth noting that one of the members appointed by the Official Opposition did write a minority report differing from the perspective of the majority, and she was certainly within her rights to do so. I think she made some very, very important points in that minority report, points that I think rural Alberta reflected in their submissions.

8:20

Members here in this House on both the government and opposition sides have made some points through their voting on Government Motion 34 and also what we've heard in debate about the feelings of rural Alberta as they relate to electoral boundaries. What it comes down to is: how do we balance the need to have representation by population in dense urban areas and areas that are not densely populated but have a large, large geographic area, and then how do we ensure that the Assembly represents a reasonable balance of what our province looks like?

In the end, given that it was such a thorough process – and I acknowledge the very legitimate concerns that rural Albertans have with the new electoral boundaries – I will support Bill 33, primarily because of the process that the commission went through.

But I will say, though – and I know this is not an issue specific to what we can address in the House with this particular bill; however, it is something perhaps that Members' Services could address, and that is: are there other ways of ensuring that rural Alberta has the representation that they need through constituency offices? Is there an opportunity – and I suggest that there certainly is an opportunity, and it's something we should look very closely at in Members' Services – to adjust the formula to ensure that rural Alberta, especially the new larger constituencies, have more resources available to them to have more constituency offices or offices open longer. Perhaps we could have a formula that any municipality above a certain size would be allocated a constituency office or a partial constituency office.

That doesn't change the fact that it's very difficult for MLAs that represent large rural constituencies to actually physically get around that constituency, to be in the communities when and where their constituents want them to be. It is a different situation than the situation I face in an inner-city, urban constituency. It just is. It is tremendously challenging. I have great empathy for MLAs who have to cover such tremendous geographic distances.

However, in the 21st century we have new communication technologies that allow for us to be engaged with our constituents in a different way than we were able to even a decade ago. I know that doesn't replace face to face – it's not as good – but it is an opportunity to at least stay engaged with what your constituents are talking about.

The other way, that's a bit of a halfway between a straight online interaction and a face to face with the MLA, is by having a

constituency office available to those residents and expanding those out. I would absolutely be supportive of two or three constituency offices for some of the larger rural constituencies. It doesn't replace that one-on-one that you would get with the MLA, but it's a halfway point. It's a start.

In the end, I think that notwithstanding the fact that I understand the concerns of rural Alberta, I would encourage all members in this House to support this bill – the process was thorough – and we can move forward and address other legislation here in the brief time that we have remaining together before the festive season.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Excellent. Any questions under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing and hearing none, I'll recognize the Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Fitzpatrick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm going to begin by saying that I've said to my caucus and I've said to many people that I thought the report was a very difficult report in that my constituency wasn't touched; however, I looked at the whole report, and I saw that there were many constituencies that were affected.

The other thing is that I was absolutely not told what way to vote. I make up my own mind even though, as I said last week with the mayors and reeves, I felt that I was mandated to do so. I did that because, in fact, if I interfered in what was presented by an independent commission, I would be gerrymandering because I'd be doing it for our advantage. I will not do that. I will not do it for anybody.

I know that the member across is greatly affected by this report, and I know that it is difficult when you have a large constituency. He, in fact, is very fortunate because he has the opportunity at least once a month to meet with all of the mayors or reeves that are in his constituency. I know because I go to those meetings whenever I can, and I get to meet those mayors and reeves as well. But I will not gerrymander by voting against the commission's report.

As the previous speaker said, there were five members on that commission: two were appointed by the opposition, two appointed by the government, and the judge. I suspect that if somebody is a judge, I suspect that if people were appointed to that commission from both the opposition and the government side, they were there to do a job. They spent the time. They met with constituents across this province, and they came back with a report.

I certainly don't think that it's the best report that could have come across, but in fact it is their report. It is what they were mandated to do, and I will support their report.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Excellent. Questions under 29(2)(a)? The Member for Calgary-Hays.

Mr. McIver: Under 29(2)(a). Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Listen, I have tremendous respect for the hon. member that just spoke. I actually hold her in very high regard even if we don't agree on everything. I've seen that she works hard and tries her best to look after her constituents. But I have to say that this is one of those times when I disagree with her fairly strenuously when she said that to vote against this bill is, by definition, gerrymandering. She couldn't be any farther from being accurate by saying so if she tried. I'm sure she means well.

There are a lot of things that she said that I agree with. She said that the people had a job to do a report, and they did it. I think whether we agree with the report or not, we should thank all five members of that committee for the work they did because I'm sure it wasn't pleasant every minute travelling around this province and listening to a variety of opinions which did not all match up and

then trying to sew them all together into a report that makes sense for Albertans.

But the fact that they did the report to the best of their ability does not automatically guarantee that it's a good report. By voting against it, it doesn't even guarantee that that means you think it's a bad report. It could mean that you don't think it's as good as it ought to be. That's quite a difference from a bad report. By voting no and calling that gerrymandering, that's just wrong, absolutely wrong. If that was the case, why would we even be talking about it here? Why would we even be having this debate? Why would we even be having this discussion, Mr. Speaker?

In fact, as the hon. member herself pointed out – and, again, I respect her opinion on everything, and I agree with her on this – there was a minority report, and the minority report needs to be considered carefully as well. If members of this Legislature agree with the main report, great. If they agree with the minority report, great. If indeed they disagree with both reports for whatever legitimate reasons that we have here, that's also great. That is us doing our job. So I really felt obligated to get on my feet to point out that making the massive leap from disagreeing with the report to gerrymandering is just not accurate.

Now, if any member of the House, me included, stands up and starts redrawing all the lines to our personal preferences, that's actually the definition of gerrymandering, and I hope that doesn't happen. I hope that doesn't happen by any of us. But to talk in general terms about the report and what's right and what's wrong and particularly talking in broader terms about whether it's better for rural Alberta or better for urban Alberta is not gerrymandering. It's actually legitimate. It's legitimate debate, legitimate comment on this report.

Mr. Speaker, I felt it necessary and ever so slightly painful, because I respect the member so much, to stand up and disagree with her so strongly on some of what she said, but I just felt it was that important that I had to do it. If the hon. member has further comments, I'd be happy to hear them, but I've surely laid out how I feel about it, and I feel quite strongly.

8:30

Ms Fitzpatrick: I thank the member for standing up and exercising his democratic right to disagree with me, but I stand my ground. I do believe that gerrymandering is manipulating the boundaries in any way. I think that if I vote and say no to this report, then I'm saying: no, they've got to be rejigged.

Four out of the five members on that commission presented a report. I believe that all of them did the best that they could. I did look at the report from the dissenting vote. I agree that they presented a report, and if I were not to support this, then I am essentially gerrymandering.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Excellent.

The Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to ask one question to the member. Look, I said: an NDP MLA. I was not trying to single the member out. It is important for her to know that. I have the greatest respect for her as well. She makes fantastic sweet tarts, that I enjoy. It's been a pleasure being able to work with her.

The Acting Speaker: Excellent.

The chair will recognize the Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Thank you. Good evening, everyone, and thanks for being here tonight to pay attention to some of us who wish to speak

to this very important matter. [interjections] Mr. Speaker, perhaps once they're done, we could carry on.

Mr. Speaker, this is probably one of the most important decisions that we will possibly be involved with during this term that we in this House have been elected to serve. I can recall back in 2010 – I was not in the House at the time but was involved with municipal politics – when this matter came up and how controversial it was then. Some members that are here tonight, including the Minister of Transportation, will recall those events and some of the discussions perhaps that came up.

Nonetheless, this is important. We have to get this right. I want people to know right from the outset that I'm not in favour of passing this bill as it reads today. I don't think it is anything except a huge mistake that we will have to endure and put up with in the rural areas as far as effective representation. It's going to be a major problem for a lot of the people that will serve not only in the near future in these new ridings but for some time afterwards.

A lot of reference has been made to the report itself that came through with the decision on the boundaries. Of course, the most important report that we got I believe came through from the minority commissioner, who did the marvelous job of submitting her own report, called the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission Minority Report, by Commissioner Gwen Day. I know that during the discussions on the motion earlier in the week and also in the conversations tonight we have talked a little bit about this minority report. It is focused on effective representation or, perhaps better said, the lack of effective representation with the decision that was rendered.

A lot of information was supplied by the commissioner. She talked about how the majority of the commission began the work with the priority of population carrying the most weight, which, of course, led to the desire to have a minimal deviation from the average number of people per constituency. But Gwen Day decided that effective representation should be the priority, in her mind. She has written several pages that have come to the conclusion that this report did not pay enough attention to that subject.

I'm going to be bringing forward a motion now, Mr. Speaker. I'll ask the pages to come to take that, and then we'll discuss what my motion is about.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Go ahead, hon. member.

Mr. Stier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While the pages distribute the motion, I'll just read it for the benefit of those that are waiting in such excitement to hear what I have to say. I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 33, Electoral Divisions Act, be amended by deleting all the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 33, Electoral Divisions Act, be not now read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that the descriptions of electoral divisions referenced in the bill and described in the DVD tabled as Sessional Paper 624/2017 do not adequately provide for the effective representation of rural Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, to carry on, I'd like to present some of the information that was contained in the minority report and discuss some of the conclusions that were drawn by this commissioner because this person was right there throughout these discussions throughout Alberta. In that report she raised a number of very, very concerning observations that I think are worthy of review. I know that just a couple of evenings ago this was discussed in some detail. I think it is worth while to go over it once again because the facts are, according to this report, that the board may have overlooked some other factors in drawing up these boundaries and therefore

may not have necessarily made the best decision they could have in trying to do their work.

Mrs. Day goes on to say:

The Majority . . .

The majority of the commission, that is.

. . . began its work by using population to justify a new riding in both Calgary and Edmonton. I do not believe that this was necessary given the discretion allowed for variances and additional considerations besides population in the Act . . . I am convinced the correct response to growth in urban population should have been an increase in variances within the cities and not an increase in the number of ridings in the two major cities.

She concluded:

This would best provide effective representation for Albertans as a whole.

She describes what effective representation is, and I think that's a key argument in this situation. She quoted section 3 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It states that every citizen

"has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein." The Charter does not guarantee that we have equal weight to our vote to achieve democracy but [only] the right to vote.

. . . Factors like geography, community history, community interest and minority representation may need to [also] be taken into account to ensure that our legislative assemblies effectively represent the diversity of our social mosaic. These are but [a few] examples of considerations which may justify departure from absolute voter parity in the pursuit of more effective representation.

In other words, other factors should have been considered, yet the commission seemed to be focused solely on population and primarily on population in rendering their final decision.

8:40

I'd just like to talk now a little bit about what she also went on to describe as the mandate that was in the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act. Section 14 is appropriate here, and it mandates the commission to consider the following factors. The first item there is:

- (a) the requirement for effective representation as guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

If you recall, I just quoted that very portion from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms where it talks about how every person has the right to vote but that it does not guarantee that we have equal weight to our vote to achieve democracy, just the right to vote.

The second part of section 14 says that the commission should consider

- (b) sparsity and density of population.

The third item:

- (c) common community interests and community organizations, including those of Indian reserves and Metis settlements.

The next one says:

- (d) wherever possible, the existing community boundaries within the cities of Calgary and Edmonton,

as they should.

The next items:

- (e) wherever possible, the existing municipal boundaries,
- (f) the number of municipalities and other local authorities,
- (g) geographical features, including existing road systems, and
- (h) the desirability of understandable and clear boundaries,

natural boundaries, in other words – rivers, gullies, ravines – major kinds of natural boundaries that exist.

It is important to note that the act is consistent with our historical foundation and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and relevant case law in mandating the commission to consider all of these factors to ensure that voters have the right to effective representation. Once again, that is the key to this entire discussion, effective representation. It is our position here on this side of the House that having these huge, huge ridings in the rurals pretty well prevents having effective representation.

I heard one of the members talk tonight about: well, I guess, supposedly, maybe you could increase the number of offices in one of these larger ridings. I can tell you right now, having one of the largest ridings in Alberta, it doesn't matter how many offices I have, hon. member. I'd need to clone myself about five times if I was to have effective representation.

Mr. Cooper: The world needs more Pats.

Mr. Stier: Exactly. Thank you, hon. member.

There's an important factor to consider about the rurals. Rural Albertans, again according to the minority report,

control the land, access to the land and provide a significant portion of the labor force that most of our primary industries depend on. Because the rural population is small compared to the cities, in order to be "effectively represented" the rural population must be granted more than a "one person, one vote" voice in order to ensure that good stewardship is exercised over the resources that the primary industries of Alberta depend on.

That is an important point. One person, one vote may be fine, but with the situation in the rurals, we have to consider other matters.

We need to consider variances.

The critical provision in the Act to ensure that effective representation is granted to Albertans is the use of variances.

The act states in section 15(1) that

the population of a proposed electoral division must not be more than 25% above nor more than 25% below the average population of all the proposed electoral divisions.

In this case, though, in spite of the provisions for up to 25 per cent plus or minus variances, a priority by the majority was set by them to achieve the lowest possible variance. They set that as their mandate. They decided that they wanted to not consider variances, and I think that is a crucial problem in the situation that we're having to deal with now because this is what justified additional ridings in the cities, and this is what has justified removing some ridings from the rurals. They had the ability to consider that.

If you look at one riding against another, that would mean that one riding could be as much as 25 per cent less than the average, that the next riding adjacent could be 25 per cent more than the average. Therefore, between those two there could be almost 50 per cent difference all told, and that would still meet the mandate. But for some reason the majority of the commission decided to ignore the variance factor and ignore all of the other main considerations that should have been given more emphasis. As the final maps show, there are several detrimental effects to our divisions resulting from that focus on population. The eroding number of MLAs representing rural Albertans is one of the key ones.

I would like to conclude my portion of this submission, Mr. Speaker, with this. The member that did this minority report from the commission, Gwen Day, said:

In conclusion, I believe it would have been in the best interest of . . . Albertans to adequately consider all mandated factors and, where justifiable, preserve existing ridings using allowable variances. Adding ridings [therefore] to the cities of Calgary and Edmonton could have been avoided, which would have resulted in much less reconfiguration throughout [all of] Alberta while still providing effective representation,

that we all sought. I would submit, Mr. Speaker, that this lady has outlined what should have happened. She has given us the reason for supporting the amendment that I have put together for us to go back to the drawing board, for us to not make a serious mistake.

I would also like to add that the AAMD and C has concurred in the resolution they just passed at their last convention. I'd just like to read their resolution here that they had made because I think that it's important to understand what all the rural association members thought. It said:

Further be it resolved that the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties (AAMDC) urge the Government of Alberta to prioritize effective representation for rural Alberta by not approving a reduction in the number of constituencies in rural Alberta.

Secondly, they said:

Further be it resolved that the AAMDC request the Government of Alberta . . .

That's you folks there.

. . . to not implement the Alberta Electoral Boundary Commission's final recommendations until the following principles are prioritized:

- That geographic size limitations, local variations in population density, and accessibility of [all] MLAs be prioritized as a determining factor in developing [these] boundaries; and
- Constituencies structure should be maintained to combine urban and rural areas to include a balance of urban and rural populations to reflect the urban-rural connectedness and dependency that exists on the ground for Alberta's regions; and
- To the extent possible, no ridings fracture rural municipalities into multiple constituencies.

I would submit, then, Mr. Speaker, given what the AAMD and C has said and all the arguments, that we pass this motion. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre. This is under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under 29(2)(a), absolutely. I'll be brief. I think that other members would like to ask the hon. member a question.

I did appreciate his comments describing some of the uniqueness of some large rural constituencies. I certainly have one. My current one stretches from north of Rimbey in an area called Bluffton to south of Sundre, from B.C. to Gull Lake in an area roughly the size of some European countries. My new constituency in my area will go from the south shore of Pigeon Lake to Water Valley, just almost outside of Cochrane.

I love it. I love driving around that area. It's my home. It's where I will hopefully remain the rest of my life, and it's full of some of the best people, including some that are watching right now. To my kids back home near Sundre, Austin and Chyanne, I'd like to say goodnight to them through you, Mr. Speaker. I know that they are getting ready for bed, and they're probably the only ones watching us tonight.

I do appreciate the hon. member expressing that he may want to elaborate a little bit more on the uniqueness of rural constituencies.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Well, thank you, hon. member. I appreciate your kind thoughts. I would only like to finish my conclusion, and that is that I'd like to state again that, ladies and gentlemen of the House, we have an opportunity to correct a wrong. We have an opportunity to eliminate what could be, according to the commissioner Gwen Day

in her minority report, a serious flaw in the decisions that were made on these boundaries. We could correct a mistake that may be passed here if we do not take another look at this.

The motion that I have put forward would give us a chance to take another look at this thing in a very serious way and make sure that we get it right the next time. I would urge all members over there, if you're in a rural riding, if you have any considerations that are questions in your mind about these boundaries, to please give this motion a thought and consider it for the vote tonight.

Thank you.

8:50

The Acting Speaker: Excellent.

Under 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills under 29(2)(a).

Mr. Cooper: Please. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to briefly ask the member. The member's constituency of Livingstone-Macleod prior to redistribution – I don't know the specific number given the new maps, and frankly I don't know all of the nuances of the changes in the constituency of Livingstone-Macleod – was 15,174 square kilometres. That is in comparison to the constituency of Calgary-Shaw, which I believe you're quite familiar with, that is 20 square kilometres. I might add, just for comparison's sake, that the constituency of Calgary-Bow, the smallest constituency in Alberta, is a whopping six square kilometres, and you compare that to the constituency of Peace River, which is 99,144 square kilometres.

I'm just wondering if the member might provide some commentary on how the massive difference in size, from six square kilometres to 99,000 square kilometres, might impact the ability of a member to effectively represent the constituency in which they are duly elected.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills for his question. I think it's important for people to realize that, not unlike many members of the government side, my riding is large, as he has pointed out. In fact, in the submissions that I made to the commission earlier this year along with my friend and colleague from Highwood, I made note of the fact that you could put approximately 16 cities of Calgary into my riding and, in comparison, you could put 12 to 13 Highwoods in my riding. In the Calgary area you have, I believe, 20 some-odds MLAs, yet in mine there's just me divided by 22 communities. So I'm divided by 22 from time to time.

How can we possibly pass such an important bill that is so inconsistent in how they decided the sizes of these boundaries? How can we possibly pass it after we've received a report from one of the members on the commission, where there are such critical factors that obviously were overlooked? This does not make sense.

I know there are a lot of members on that side that feel the same. I would urge you to support the amendment.

The Acting Speaker: Just for the record this will be amendment RA1.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod for his comments and for the amendment that he's offered tonight. I want to, you know, just indicate that I have some considerable sympathy for the position that the hon. member is in and has taken. I know that on all

sides of the House there are members who are concerned about the boundaries that have been recommended to us by the commission.

You know, there are a number of factors that have to be balanced, as the hon. member has said. I remember when I was on Edmonton city council and we prepared a submission for the boundaries commission. At that time there was a huge disparity in terms of population in ridings such that the courts actually made a ruling, which the member has referred to. I remember – these are very rough numbers as it was a number of years ago – that the riding that had the smallest population was the Cardston riding at that time, which had around 8,000. I'm doing this from memory, so, people, forgive me if it's a little bit off. The constituency that had the greatest population was Edmonton-Whitemud, which had a population well over 24,000. I think it was after Premier Getty was defeated by Percy Wickman, so it briefly was a Liberal riding. Of course, the Premier of the day took refuge in Stettler, where he was easily elected in the by-election at that time. Let me just say that the disparity between the populations of rural ridings and urban ridings was so striking that it absolutely was determined that this was in part a disenfranchisement of people. That's the basis of the 25 plus or minus ruling, which was a very, very wide range, I will admit. That was the outside boundary set by the court at that time.

Now, there are many difficult choices that we have to make and that the commission had to make in balancing things. To say that we're coming down in favour of this particular approach doesn't necessarily negate the importance of some of the ideas that have been put forward. Certainly, the size of constituencies makes a difference in terms of how easy they are to represent. On our side we have some of the very largest ridings in the province by a wide margin, so we are indeed familiar with that challenge.

Then, of course, there's the question of population, which was the subject of the court challenge way back when. The argument was made that, roughly, people's votes needed to be of equal effect in terms of selecting governments. The court took a very wide view of what that acceptable range was, but that's an important consideration. I hope people on the other side recognize that. In order to maintain rural ridings at their current size and not to let them get much larger, there's a trade-off. These are all trade-offs. The trade-off for that is that the growth in Edmonton and Calgary is not reflected in the makeup.

There are other options. I know that the previous government, not the last time but in the past, would take the easy way out and simply add more ridings. So this place grew, and we had more politicians and more politicians. I know that for hon. members on the other side their natural conservatism leads them to, you know, reject too many politicians in the public's lives. That's a solution the previous government found that satisfied rural and urban people, but it didn't satisfy people in general. The Chamber was getting a little bit crowded, so we've taken a strong position in opposition that 83 is enough and that we shouldn't be expanding those.

I was also on city council on another redistribution where Edmonton lost a seat because of relative growth in the province. Like the hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod, I did my best to represent the people of Edmonton in my constituency. I'll save people the trouble of looking up in *Hansard* what I said at the time. I strongly argued, as I think a good representative should, that we shouldn't be losing seats. In fact, in the end, Mr. Speaker, all of those things have to be balanced in one way or another.

What I think tipped the balance with respect to our position is that we did not wish to be seen to be making political decisions when we had appointed an independent commission to do the work and that it was important, I think, for democracy and certainly for the people of Alberta to see that we weren't trying to arrange things to our own benefit. I think that that is the risk. I'm not suggesting

that people on the other side are doing that by any stretch of the imagination, but it was actually that particular issue that tipped the scales from our point of view. We wished to make that very clear, that we appointed an independent commission, and we're going to respect their recommendations with regard to this.

9:00

The House made its determination when it debated the motion, which was then passed in the House and a number of amendments were made. Some were accepted. That sets the tone, that sets the ground rules for the drafting of this particular act, and that's where the debate, in my view, should have remained. Nevertheless, the hon. member is well within his rights to introduce this amendment, and I respect what he is doing. I respect what the opposition is saying with respect to this because they have a point, but there are other points as well. To deprive Edmonton and Calgary from having the same representation that reflects their growth and their population is also a problem. These things all have to be taken into account and balanced.

With respect, Mr. Speaker, I will encourage members of the House to defeat this amendment because I believe that the Assembly has made its decision in principle. I see no reason to change the direction that we have set, so I would hope that we would pass the bill that has been put forward by the government.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Questions under 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Mr. Nixon: Yes. Thanks. Thanks to the Government House Leader for his well-thought-out comments. I do agree with some of what the hon. Government House Leader has said. The first thing, Mr. Speaker, though, through you to him, that I would like to offer is that I'm very sure – I'm almost positive – that the hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler would be happy right now to resign if the Premier would like to come and run in Drumheller. I don't think that's going to happen, though, and history probably won't repeat itself with that constituency.

In addition to that, the hon. Government House Leader is talking a lot about population and variances in the population. He took us down a long history lesson of some of the history around that. It was very interesting. He's been around a little longer than I have, Mr. Speaker, so he probably remembers a lot more of that.

Mr. Cooper: Or less.

Mr. Nixon: Or he remembers a lot less than I do. I don't know which one it is. That's a good point.

The problem with that, Mr. Speaker, is that when you look at the constituencies that have been put forward in this report, the rural constituencies often have higher populations than the urban ones in this current report. It is a little better in the second draft. In the first draft my constituency, for example, would have had 17 per cent more than any other urban constituency in the entire province. It was larger than the country of Belgium. The argument that this is about . . .

Mr. Ceci: In population?

Mr. Nixon: Yeah, 17 per cent more in population than any of the urban ridings. That's what it was. It would have been the highest populated constituency in the entire province and bigger than the European countries. [interjections] Yes, but it also had the highest population . . .

The Acting Speaker: Through the chair, hon. member.

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, through you to the Finance minister, who is struggling with the numbers, it would have been 17 per cent higher in population than any other constituency in Alberta, and the land mass would have been bigger than Belgium. Now the Finance minister is with us, and we're ready to continue.

The point that I am making to the Government House Leader, through you, Mr. Speaker, is that I sympathize with his argument. I agree with his argument. I do not believe that it is this place's responsibility to draw the lines, and I think that if we went down that road, we would certainly be gerrymandering, which you will not see the opposition attempt to do.

We are talking about this report. The report has been brought forward to this place for us to determine whether or not that committee met the requirements. The committee worked hard. I know two people that were on it. I know how hard they worked, but the reality is this. This is not just about adjusting populations for Edmonton and Calgary, which is important and is certainly a factor that had to be addressed. But what we have ended up with is populations in rural Alberta that are actually higher than in many of the city ridings and at the very least on par.

As the hon. member pointed out, we have stuff within the act to make sure that that doesn't necessarily happen so we can have variances for rural Alberta to be able to recognize the uniqueness of representing large constituencies like that, a constituency, again, like mine, where my southernmost populated place to my northernmost populated place is over two hours one way or stretches from the B.C. border and goes almost all the way to highway 2. [interjections] Again the Finance minister wants to heckle, but I've been to his constituency. It's a great place. I was born and raised in Calgary, near his constituency. Even I can walk across it in about 10 or 15 minutes. But I've got two national parks in my constituency, 12 provincial parks, three hospitals, over 160-some elected people. It's just different. It doesn't mean that it's better or not. It is different.

The law allowed for some variance associated with that, and this panel that went in there, except for Mrs. Day, who rejected that, went ahead and ignored that variance and tried to bring everything to par, which is not within the law or their mandate and, in addition to that, went further than that and tried to predict our communities that would be declining in population over the next 10 years in order to accommodate the cities, which certainly was not in their mandate.

Again, I appreciate the hon. Government House Leader's comments, but I think he's wrong on this one, particularly when you look at the fact that many rural ridings have now higher populations than urban constituencies.

The Acting Speaker: Any other questions or comments under 29(2)(a)? Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm just curious to know if the member opposite would like to comment on situations like Calgary-North being minus 16, Calgary-North East ... [Mr. Cooper's speaking time expired]

The Acting Speaker: Excellent.

Any speakers to amendment RA1? The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. W. Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to speak on behalf of my colleague from Livingstone-Macleod and in favour of his reasoned amendment to Bill 33. But before I do that, you know, I appreciate the Government House Leader's history lesson somewhat, but, with all due respect, we are losing three rural

MLAs. That's a fact. Whether you consider it or not, I think that shows that the report specifically states that based on the population numbers – as my colleague from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills pointed out, the numbers are rather exorbitant and rather large.

I want to speak in favour of this because, you know, I kind of have a feeling that in the long haul I think rural constituencies are getting a bit of a short stick. It's kind of frustrating to see the rural-urban interchange. A lot of people don't understand, living in the rural constituencies, the amount of effort it takes to maintain the relationships with different councils, different towns, and different areas. I don't have the same size constituency as my friends from Livingstone-Macleod or Little Bow although they border mine. I can guarantee you that in two and a half years I've got well over 120,000 kilometres on my truck, and he's already gone through one.

I just want to point that out that, you know, the mandate of the Electoral Boundaries Commission was to update the electoral districts while respecting certain conditions, but I want to say that there are significant issues with some of the data used. In the minority report it was suggested that in my constituency – it completely ignored all natural boundaries, which was part of the original mandate, as I understood it, and ignored the natural boundaries of the Bow River to the north and the Highwood River to the east.

For some strange reason it was mentioned in the minority report that several various submissions were put in place to have highway 2A as the eastern boundary of Highwood and extend it west all the way to the Rocky Mountains. It's interesting. When the commission said, "Well, the Rocky Mountains: that allows for growth and expansion." And I said: "Who lives there? Sasquatch?" I mean, there's no population growth in the Rocky Mountains. I found that rather interesting. Moreover, after we did a comprehensive data search of all oral and written submissions, we found that actually there were no submissions made to include highway 2 as the eastern boundary. There was no way they should have ignored the true natural boundaries of the Bow River and Highwood River. So I question some of the data sources of the commission. Fortunately enough, in the second report I think they saw justice there to include the Highwood River now and the Bow River as the eastern and northern boundaries and part of the Davisburg community, where I currently reside.

Again, as I pointed out, we're going to lose three rural MLAs, and it just doesn't make sense to me. It kind of boils down, they said, to the rapid growth of the urban centres of Edmonton and Calgary, but I don't think the commission really took the opportunity – maybe they didn't Google map – to drive through some of our rural constituencies. There are a lot of great distances that we have to drive and travel just to get to a couple of meetings a day. I maintain two offices. I keep a fairly tight budget in High River and Okotoks. They're not open eight hours a day – I can guarantee you that – but we manage to get by to meet with all the MD of Foothills folks and the commissioners as well as the two town councillors.

9:10

I understand that the mandated consideration of the Electoral Boundaries Commission was to take into consideration the requirement for effective representation guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Doing a little research, I found that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not guarantee that we have equal voice to our vote to achieve democracy or the right to vote. Hmm. The concept of one person, one vote is not a Canadian construct and is not in the Charter, actually. It suggests to me that maybe they revisit the ridings. Maybe it's just done in the wrong way. The Canadian Charter of

Rights and Freedoms, rather, was set in place to guarantee that Canadians deserve fair representation.

It's not clearly the case in rural ridings. Again, we're losing three rural MLAs. How can one constituent who lives hours away from a constituency office drop in to pay a visit? Calgary-Shaw, it's fairly close. For my friend in Livingstone-Macleod, Little Bow, and myself, it usually takes two or three days of setting up appointments and people taking time from their day to spend a half an hour or so on the road just to get to our office to have a personal meeting or vice versa in our case. I don't think it's fair and equal, and I'm not sure that the commission defined the Charter correctly.

In the urban ridings, in spite of the fact that the act allows for plus or minus 25 per cent variances, the commission chose to create two new ridings in Edmonton and Calgary, and ironically they're only plus or minus 5 per cent. I don't think, in my opinion, that it's quite fair. It's obvious that the desire, however, came to be to prioritize populations as a primary factor to achieve minimal deviation from the average number of residents per constituency. Does that make sense in Drumheller-Stettler? I think the country of Belgium is smaller. I mean, it's going to take a horrendous effort just to transport yourself across that one constituency.

I mean, when the commission talked in the initial minority report about excluding the Highwood River and the Bow River from my constituency and talked about submissions for highway 2A, I had to kindly remind the commission that the Highwood River has only been a part of the Highwood constituency for 115 years. It's been there forever. I mean, it's part of the constituency. The natural economic corridor between Okotoks, High River, and Aldersyde has been present there since 1905. Moreover, John A. Macdonald actually founded the first school in my constituency in my neighbourhood, and, no, I'm not a graduate of the first graduating class. But there's a lot of history there.

Just around the corner from my place is the South Calgary Airport, and that airport provided facilities for up to 2,500 Allied pilots to train during the Second World War. We just put a plaque there. That's part of my constituency. The history there is quite phenomenal. The town of High River was part of the infrastructure and the people who supported those pilots and, obviously, the support staff that went along with providing services for those individuals who actually learned and trained to fly aircraft and fight in the Second World War. You know, there's a lot of history in my neighbourhood.

Thankfully, I think the commission on the second go-around found the right perspective to bring that back into my constituency, but they completely eliminated the town of High River. The town of High River is the natural economic corridor. Especially after the flood in 2013 Okotoks and High River were in a natural symbiotic economic relationship. Plus, you know, the MD of Foothills and the Foothills school board commission run both of those areas. It was a trade-off between High River and Livingstone-Macleod's area of Turner Valley and Black Diamond, an identical population that was completely ignored. There was no understanding of the rural symbiotic economic relationship between those two towns. It's like separating a brother and a sister. We still don't understand why. We're hopeful that if this amendment goes forward, we'll be able to add some reason and relevance to that decision.

You know, in conclusion, Mr. Speaker, no matter where you're from, you can see that this commission, regardless of how it was set up, is supporting the urban population of the province at a higher value, those living in cities versus those living in the country. There's no regard for those living in large constituencies in rural areas, where people are forced to travel great distances to meet with their MLAs. It's not equal representation, in my mind. I still find it unfortunate that this government has decided just not to listen to the

erosion of the rural ridings. It doesn't allow for effective representation of all Albertans. I mean, when the Government House Leader spoke of redistribution based on population, he completely ignored the fact that we are losing three rural MLAs. I spoke to many MLAs and many Albertans who feel this way, and I haven't met one MLA that I know of in the rural areas that doesn't focus on how hard it is and how they understand what it takes to run a large rural constituency. They worry about the furthest away from the offices. They just don't think it's fair.

After hearing the stories from those in rural ridings and urban ridings talk about the lack of consultation and complete disregard for those affected by the changes, I can only oppose this bill, and I hope that members on the other side of the House and, obviously, members on my side of the House want to support this reasoned amendment. Let's just do something that is right. Let's bring common sense back to this boundaries commission.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Any questions under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing and hearing none, the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to rise to speak to my colleague's reasoned amendment of Bill 33, Electoral Divisions Act, which essentially says that it should not be read now because it, in fact, does not adequately provide for effective representation for rural Alberta.

Let me begin by saying that I don't actually have any issues with the motives of the commission. I think that they probably went about their work in good faith. But I do have issues with the end result. I speak of this mostly on general principle because, quite frankly, in my own riding I really don't have any concerns at all. There were very minimal changes to a couple of my border regions. The population is just about right in the middle of where it should be for the average ridings, and in fact to their credit I think that they did the right thing in consolidating some of the Maskwacis reserve properties all into one riding instead of having them split between three ridings. So I think they did the right thing in those regards.

But I still think that there are significant concerns with the Electoral Boundaries Commission report, and I'd like to approach them from a slightly different angle than has been spoken about so far. As I've said, I don't feel that they properly represent rural portions of Alberta. The mandate was in fact to create a representation that's fair and equal. It's the very issue of equality that I think I struggle with. The reality is that I think the boundaries commission in setting a priority on population only, or at least stating that, has both made a mistake and also maybe even exposed their own bias. I'd like to go into the details of what I mean by that. The boundaries commission, as I've said, sets a dangerous precedent by reducing the count of rural ridings by two and increasing the already large proportion of representation of Edmonton and Calgary.

Quite frankly, there's a balance of power here that is shifting toward an urban-centric bias in our province. I say that, I guess, for a couple of reasons. Even just simply looking at the raw numbers, what we have here are 46 seats now for the two urban areas of Edmonton and Calgary and the remaining 41 seats for all the rest of the province. That works out to about 53 per cent for the two urban areas and 47 per cent for the rural areas, or all the rest of the province, quite frankly. But that doesn't fairly represent the population. The population figures are that the two urban areas are about 51.1 or roughly 51 per cent of the total population of the province, but somehow they ended up with 2 per cent more of the seats and the exact opposite in the two rural areas: we end up with

about 49 per cent of the province, but we only get 47 per cent of the seats.

9:20

So I think that there is, in fact, an imbalance of the actual population numbers. The priority of using population wasn't even used fairly. It in fact betrays, I think, an urbancentric bias that has been for too long prevalent in our province. It's an issue that I've raised a number of times in this House in the fact that I think there is a distinct negative bias to the rural areas of our province from the government that we have in our province. There is a centralization bias, and I think it comes about primarily because the majority of the people who often make decisions in government and the two urban areas, of course, only see their own immediate circle. They're completely unaware of what the rural areas are really about. The decision-makers are too often entirely urban individuals; therefore, there is a bias in decision-making that's made there.

I'd like to cite a few specific examples of that.

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

I can carry on? Okay. Thank you.

A couple of specific examples. We have heard endlessly in this House about the inequitable and unfair health care funding that goes to the central and rural regions of Alberta. On a per capita basis the two urban areas get a substantially higher amount of funding to their areas, and the health care provided to central and rural Albertans is substantially substandard, substantially subgrade, and the money that's spent on those areas is substantially less than they actually contribute in their fair portion of taxes. So there is, in fact, a real and a serious imbalance here, an injustice in that regard.

We have the same thing with policing. We heard about this just last week. The police forces are inadequate. They're spread across vast areas. They're unable to adequately provide policing services, so rural people live in terror and fear, have their stuff constantly stolen, their houses broken into, guns pointed at their heads. There is an injustice and an inequity here that does not represent in any way, shape, or form a fair and an equitable representation in this House of the people that have to struggle with these kinds of things.

We have the same issue with lottery funding, where there is an unfair bias. The groups that participate in lottery funding, the nonprofits, in the urban areas get a higher percentage than those in northern and rural areas.

So you add all these things up, and the reality is that we have an unjust representation of people from rural areas versus those in urban areas. I really do believe that there is in fact a continuing bias toward urbancentric government and Legislature in our province, and it's something that I don't think rural people should be willing to stand for any longer.

You can't use logic to justify these imbalances and these injustices, so we have to reassess the report that the Electoral Boundaries Commission has provided and make sure that this House is balanced. The people who are being unjustly treated need the opportunity to have full and fair representation in this House, not a decreased representation.

The fact that there is one commissioner of the five members who stated a dissenting opinion tells me that in reality there was some tension within the boundaries commission. There is not full agreement there. There are considerations that need to be taken into place, and in fact it is a flawed report. I'm not saying that they didn't do their best job. I'm not questioning their motives, but I am saying that the facts of the matter are that in terms of fair and equal representation it's not happening, and this makes it even worse.

The argument is that the ongoing erosion of rural representation for Albertans does not allow for effective representation of all

Albertans, and, Madam Speaker, I think this is something that we should correct. I quote the minority dissent. She stated that, "if Alberta continues to grow at such a rate, a critical part of our history, culture and primary economic voice will be lost, [and] if at every boundary review we collapse two or three rural ridings," she wrote, we will simply end up in a place where it is not sustainable, and this is "not a sustainable approach" to the challenge that we have of trying to find fair and equitable ridings. Then she mentioned that giving both Calgary and Edmonton an additional riding was unjustified, which is another way to simply say that it is in fact unjust. That's my biggest point. I think it truly is unjust.

There need to be solutions found to it. I think that there could be solutions. I don't necessarily personally think, as the Government House Leader has said, that adding more seats is a good idea either, but I do think that we need to have a more just and a more balanced approach to truly fair and equitable representation for all Albertans, and in this particular case the unjust cousins are the rural ones over and over again.

The main complaint of rural Albertans is about the decreasing reality of representation, and all of these other things that have been said are reasons that contribute to that. I won't rehearse them. We've already heard them. But I do believe that this in some way is a betrayal of democratic representation for rural people. Even though in my riding I don't have those particular issues, when I look at the overall direction of the report, I don't think that it's reasonable. I think that we really do need to make sure that one region or group of voters is not dramatically underrepresented in an unacceptable kind of way.

I just think that there's a dangerous precedent set here. I'm not the first one to say this. It's dangerous in the sense that if future constituency assessments pattern themselves after this, the plan will almost guarantee that rural Alberta will be in line for further reductions in the future, rendering the area virtually unrepresentable. This is a problem for many reasons as have already been said. Part of it, of course, is the land access, the size of it, all of these things.

One part that hasn't been mentioned is that the constituents themselves have complained to us about the difficulty of them even getting the opportunity to come to see us, to come into our office. They can't make the trip. It's too far. The elderly are most concerned. It's difficult for them to travel long distances. Making these trips during the wintertime on bad roads is not only an inconvenience; quite frankly, in many cases it's flat-out dangerous.

The key here is effective representation, and that, quite frankly, is just not happening now. While I commend the commission for the work that it's done – and I think in many ways they probably did the best that they could – the reality is that the government does need to make the right decision. I recognize the Government House Leader's concern about appearing to try to control or manipulate it politically. None of us want to go there. I commend him truly for having taken that position. I do agree with him. But I think sending this back for further study to an unbiased group would be the right thing to do because truly it does not in fact represent fair and equal representation for rural Albertans.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to speak under 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise, and I'd just like to thank my colleague from Lacombe-Ponoka for his remarks this evening. I'm just curious to know what his thoughts are with respect to population size and constituency. I know that

I've had the opportunity to rise and ask a couple of members. Unfortunately, I missed the opportunity to ask the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood about this particular concern of mine.

I often hear members from the government talking about how there are more people in urban ridings than there are in rural ridings and that somehow it makes it better, if you will, or it makes the representation more equal, even though we've laid out all the other factors around what is effective representation or not. If you look at a constituency like Lacombe-Ponoka, that's approximately 4,000 square kilometres, we see that the population is very close to parity, you know, which is, obviously, the target. But there are other significant challenges. If we look at Edmonton, we see the vast majority of constituencies being less than 5 per cent of variance: minus 1, minus 1, 2, 5, 3, 3, minus 3, minus 3 all across Edmonton.

9:30

Then we look at some constituencies in rural Alberta. Particularly, as I've mentioned this evening, Cold Lake-St. Paul is the most glaring at a plus 15, with a population of almost 54,000. We only have to look to Calgary. Calgary-Lougheed is a minus 8. The swing between those two constituencies is over 14,000 voters, yet the members from the government side seem to want to lead people to believe this evening that constituencies inside the cities have more population in almost all cases. Calgary-South East is a perfect example, with only 40,000 constituents. Calgary-North East, a minus 14. Calgary-North, the largest of all, is minus 16, which is 39,000 people and less than 30 square kilometres.

I'm just curious to know if the Member for Lacombe-Ponoka has any comments on the government members trying to lead us to believe that, in fact, the city ridings have way more of a population base, so it is essentially equal, when the numbers in the report tell a very different story than that.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yeah. Well, you know, to be honest, doesn't everybody think that they're the centre of the universe? Of course, we all think that we're the centre of everything. But the reality is that the numbers tell us the actual case here, as has just been pointed out a few moments ago, and I refer again to the general population numbers of the entire province. The reality is that the two urban areas barely represent, by about 1 per cent, any more than half of the population. The other half of the population actually lives spread all around the rest of the province, but about 99 per cent of the actual territory geographically is also spread out there.

As I said, I think it's truly not equal representation when the big geographic areas also have the big population numbers. In spite of the illusion of those who may feel like their riding is the biggest just because they live in a city, when it's carved up in so many little pieces, their numbers aren't bigger. In fact, in many cases, according to the report, they are actually smaller numbers. For the commission to have made the assumption that... [Mr. Orr's speaking time expired]

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the reasoned amendment? The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'm rising this evening to speak to Bill 33, the Electoral Divisions Act, and more specifically to the amendment that my colleague from Livingstone-Macleod moved just a little while ago. In our work as MLAs we debate a lot of legislation on a number of different topics, but perhaps none of

them so closely affects us and the work that we do in the way that this bill does. Every member here was duly elected by the people living within a specified set of boundaries. Over the past two and a half years or for some of us four, 12 or more years, whatever, we've spent time cultivating relationships with the people and the businesses in those areas.

It is more than that, however. The boundaries currently in place do a good job of grouping areas together that fit well together. Of course, I'm talking more about the rural areas here, Madam Speaker. Fortunately, the United Conservative Party caucus is well equipped to address these rural issues. The government has a much simpler job when it comes to representing their constituents. That's said as a practical fact and not as an excuse or an off-putting comment. The truth is that when you're representing a rural riding, you face challenges that urban MLAs just cannot understand.

For example, it's not outside the realm of possibility to have the MLA for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview take the spot of the MLA for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood when a scheduling conflict occurs, and I'm sure that the member is happy to do so. All that involves is a quick drive across the boundary line at 50th Street or Yellowhead Trail, and you're likely already halfway to where you need to be. That's just not the way it works in the rural ridings. I mean, even if the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview was in Kernohan, it's still not a huge undertaking to go to the Alberta Avenue area, for example.

Now, let's transport that into rural Alberta. Say, for example, the Member for Drumheller-Stettler is asked to step in and help the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, outstanding, I might add. The first member is busy in Oyen when his neighbouring MLA asks for someone to help in Didsbury. That's nearly a three-hour drive in the summer with good road conditions. On winter tires it's just not as practical.

Let's face it. Rural MLAs are already hard pressed to cover the entire territory of their constituency due to the large geographical area involved. Even if you take out trying to help out a neighbouring MLA, the new boundaries in this proposed legislation are even more cumbersome. I think we can all appreciate that the job of an MLA is not one where you can sit back and relax and wait a couple of years before you need to put in that effort again. The increased difficulty with a rural riding is that a very substantial portion of our time is spent on the road, which means it's more difficult to have as much quality face-to-face interaction and conversation as our urban counterparts, which leads me to talk about representation.

I've hinted at the lengthy distances that rural MLAs need to traverse in order to meet those constituents across their ridings, but those are about to increase further since rural Alberta is about to lose three seats. This is devastating to rural Albertans. Nobody would deny that urban centres are growing. To do so would be ridiculous, but equally ridiculous is the idea that due to urban growth rural areas should be passed over, lumped together, and receive less representation. What it all comes down to is that single word, "representation."

Perhaps our education system needs a bit more work in this area because it seems that people think that our Canadian parliamentary system allows for the notion of one person, one vote. While it may sound nice and that's a facet of the American electoral system, I'm sure that all of us here this evening have come up with our own opinions on how that electoral system works south of the border. Regardless of what it looks like, it's not the way things are done up here. Rather, we work with a system of variances that ensure that, generally speaking, every MLA represents roughly the same number of people. The variance is actually pretty generous when used properly, which allows for some maneuvering. Unfortunately, what happened here is that the commission attributed undue weight

to population, which means that Alberta's ridings see a very low variance but risk ineffective representation in our rural areas, which contravenes the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Madam Speaker, what we just need to remember is that MLAs do not just represent the people within the ridings but the businesses and industries, too. As the representative for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo oil and gas are huge stakeholders. I need to represent them as much as I represent every individual person who lives in the area. Oil and gas in this situation own and control great swaths of land. They are job creators, and their business, all sides of it, impacts the secondary businesses, that further employ people and provide the goods and services we all need.

You know, Madam Speaker, my constituency has increased substantially, which I'm fine with, but it is a good descriptor for the government side as to what I have to do to travel across my constituency. I have the communities of Fort Chipewyan and Fort Smith in my constituency. Anyone over there know where those are? No? I didn't think so. Four and a half hours just to get to Fort Chip.

Now, Madam Speaker, I have three routes to go with. I can travel by road, air, or water. But the thing about driving by ground is that I can only do it in the winter on an ice road, and I have had the pleasure of doing that. It is a very interesting road. I had the pleasure of driving next to a buffalo that was running on that road, and it was truly a cool experience.

An Hon. Member: Did you pass?

Mr. Yao: I passed the buffalo.

I almost got hit by a semi truck coming over a rise because those hills are pretty dramatic, and they're very narrow, so you make sure you hug on the right side when you're going over a hill because there are large fuel trucks coming the other way with empty loads, and they're trying to hustle back to Fort McMurray.

Just to get to Fort Chip, it is four and half hours on that ice road. Literally there are moose and all sorts of good stuff. In the summer, though, it is a beautiful area because, despite the myth, not all the sand up there is mixed with oil, and there are some beautiful, beautiful sand dunes up there. I would highly encourage the government side to do their next retreat up there. I will guide you up there. I won't necessarily guide you out, but I'll guide you into that area. You will recognize the beauty of the Canadian Shield as well because that is also my area, a lovely, lovely, fantastic piece of property up there with beautiful lakes that are pristine and clear. That's just to get to Fort Chip. I do encourage you to go visit Fort Chipewyan because it is beautiful.

9:40

The other ways to get to Fort Chipewyan, by the way, are to hire a small plane or go by boat. I did go by riverboat once, a jet boat. That was quite the adventure because Lake Athabasca is actually a very, very dangerous lake to go on. It is very large. The winds are harsh, so it is very turbulent out there, and there are tons of patches of weeds through there. Let me tell you what. My friend did not have a proper cleanout on his jet boat. So we drive through some weeds. We're in the middle of this huge lake. It is like an ocean. We are stuck, and we are scared. We did rock, scissors, paper to see who had to do the deed, and it was me that lost. I take a knife, have to kind of peel off some clothes there, and my buddy is going to hold me by my ankles as I go underneath that boat and I'm trying clear the intake of weeds. Boy, is that water cold, and that was in the middle of summer. It was a very dramatic thing. I'm still scarred from it, actually, but we got out. I got all those weeds out.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I really appreciate your story, but I'd like us to get back to the reasoned amendment, if we could, and why this is important.

Mr. Yao: Ah, yes. This is a good reasoned amendment, and I highly recommend that we support this amendment.

Certainly, I was just trying to teach the city mice across the way about the challenges we do have in the rural areas. I did not even get to speak about Fort Smith because Fort Smith is another four and a half hours' drive – and that is going 100 kilometres an hour, by the way – north of Fort Chip. So I have to drive nine hours. But I'll tell you what.

An Hon. Member: One way?

Mr. Yao: That's one way.

I do guarantee you that Fort Smith is a treasure. It is a gem. If you ever get the chance to go up there, that is the neatest community that you will ever see. The people are amazing and wonderful. They're very friendly, and it is phenomenal. But they're very concerned that my representative skills are going to be so thinned out. They have very many concerns there. That is very much an area that is concerned, where they are very independent and very able to survive on their own. But nine hours just to get to Fort Smith, and it is a very interesting drive.

To sum up, I am going vote in support of this reasoned amendment because the legislation as it is denies Albertans equal access to our elected officials, which is what Canadians have a right to do. So I ask that when you think of these people up in Fort Chipewyan and Fort Smith and you think about me on that road, that ice road with big buffalo on there – I tell you that I need to bring one of my co-workers here who has a gun so that we can eat some buffalo meat. Madam Speaker, have you ever eaten buffalo meat? It is fantastic. It is good. I guarantee that should you ever experience a rural riding, you would very much enjoy such cuisine. [interjections] Buffalo. No. Don't get me wrong. I recognize that in socialist countries dogs are your cuisine.

An Hon. Member: What?

Mr. Yao: Nothing.

Anyways, Madam Speaker, in a nutshell, though, I do agree with my friend's reasoned amendment. I think it's a good amendment. I think we have to reconsider these lines, and I hope the government side truly considers this.

Thank you so much.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member. I've actually been to Fort Chip, so there you go.

Are there any other members that wish to speak under 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, are there any other members wishing to speak to the reasoned amendment? The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I wanted to rise in the House tonight to support the reasoned amendment to Bill 33, Electoral Divisions Act, on the grounds that this bill did not have adequate consultation with stakeholders from rural Alberta. In fact, in the consultation that they did have with rural Alberta, they didn't always listen to them. There are several instances where we can see that the stakeholders in Alberta said what they would like but the commission did something different. Now, the Electoral Boundaries Commission was given a mandate to provide government with new electoral districts that respected a number of

factors, including the needs of community organizations, population density, and most importantly, effective representation.

I want to focus the majority of my time on effective representation and why this bill should not proceed to second reading. It threatens our ability to remain just that, effective. The mantle we bear as legislators can be difficult given the number of hats we wear on a daily basis. As we travel through our constituencies, we have different duties to perform in each community, and these different duties that we perform are duties that our constituents want us to do, things that they want us to attend, things that they want us to consult with them on, and to listen to their concerns. Though titles range from Premier to minister to critic or simply member, we all represent a constituency that elected us here in the first place, but those constituents don't always get the attention they deserve.

The most important resource we have is our time, but it is always in short supply. Of course, our time becomes a lot shorter when we're spending so many hours travelling to and from different events within our constituency. Madam Speaker, it takes time to visit with these constituents and stakeholders. It takes time to host town hall meetings. It takes time to travel back and forth to the Legislature, and it takes time to travel throughout the constituency and canvass the neighbourhoods, some more than others.

So, Madam Speaker, it's important that we consider not only the populations within our constituencies but also the amount of area that we cover. We strive to be as efficient as possible with our time, but it is not always an option, and if this bill proceeds to second reading, it will jeopardize the already limited time we have with our constituents. Again, we spend so much time travelling in our rural constituencies, travelling back and forth and going to different events and different meetings. That travelling time isn't time that helps our constituents. It's basically wasted time. It's the steering wheel time is all it is. It's not time that benefits us, our families, or our constituents.

One area of concern that is of a particular interest to me is the geographic size of our rural ridings. The Electoral Boundaries Commission neglected this key consideration. According to this report the makeup of this House after the next election will be several rural constituencies fewer. How is it possible that this decision can be in the best interest of Albertans?

On one hand, there is the optical side of the argument. Constituents that rarely or never see their elected representatives make the assumption that their member is just lazy or doesn't care. In very few cases this may be the result of a member just not making an effort, but for the most part it's a matter of time, time that it takes to travel and to go back and forth between the communities within the constituency.

Rural constituencies are littered with small towns that have many of the same needs as urban centres, but what takes an urban MLA minutes to travel from one community to the next may take a rural MLA hours. How can anyone think that this kind of travel requirement leads to effective representation? It doesn't, and that's why I support this reasoned amendment.

Madam Speaker, with the new constituency boundaries that they're proposing right now, I've done some calculations. Coming to the Legislature takes me about three and a half hours to drive. Driving to the furthest community in this new constituency would take three and a half hours, and I'm not even on the furthest south portion of the constituency; that's actually another hour south. So it's a four-and-a-half-hour drive from the furthest communities within the same constituency. And that's not even the borders of the constituency; that's the communities within the constituency.

Now, in the constituency that I represent right now, Grande Prairie-Smoky, one of the furthest northwest points is a small community called Webster. It's about 40 kilometres north of Grande Prairie, and it was established in 1916 as part of the Edmonton-British Columbia railway. To the southeast in the constituency is the town of Fox Creek, an oil and gas town with gas processing plants that employ much of the town's population.

9:50

Now, I mention these places because each of them has similar needs as urban centres. They have small and medium-sized businesses that employ other workers. They have children that need to go to school. They have sick and elderly people that need medical attention, and they have concerns about the safety of their communities. The problem is that these two towns are over two hours apart but need their concerns addressed equally by their provincial representative. Again, Madam Speaker, those two towns in the existing constituency are two hours apart, well over two hours apart, actually, but the new constituency will be over four hours apart.

Now, at the risk of sounding overly confident, I work tirelessly to ensure that the communities in the Grande Prairie-Smoky constituency get the proper attention that they need. I do everything I can to hit as many events as I can and cover as many meetings as I can and get to everything that I possibly can within the constituency. But there are countless other communities just like Fox Creek and Webster that are similar in distances apart but have equal needs to the rest of this great province, and I can't get to them all as often as I would like. I'm not making excuses. I'm just simply stating facts. I'm not complaining either. That's my job. I love my job. I enjoy going to these communities. I enjoy hearing the people's concerns. I enjoy going to the events.

It's incredible, the amount of work and the number of community-minded people that are out there in my constituency that are doing good work in their community. They're volunteering. They belong to organizations to help their communities grow and thrive. It's incredible to see that. In fact, that's probably one of the greatest things that I've learned by being elected to this position, the amount of community involvement there is out there and all the different organizations doing such great work. But these organizations want to see their elected representative at times. They want him to show up to an event once in a while. They want to know that their elected representative cares and is concerned about what they're doing. The only way to do that is to be there. By making these constituencies so large, it doesn't benefit these communities. In fact, it hurts.

I know that in some of the urban constituencies there are concerns about population. We understand that. We have rules in place for when the constituencies are drawn out, you know, the variances of population, what's allowed and what isn't. But, Madam Speaker, the redraw that we've seen in this commission's report was huge in the number of changes that they made, drastic changes. In fact, probably one of the most frustrating things, I think, in our communities up there was the difference between the interim report and the final report and how drastic the change was between the two. I mean, in the interim report we lost Grande Prairie-Wapiti. It disappeared. In the final report we lost Grande Prairie-Smoky, and Grande Prairie-Wapiti was still there. Now, that's a pretty drastic change, which the people never had an opportunity to influence. The final report comes out, and there it is. It's done. It shows up here, in this Legislature, and then it's here in front of us to vote on. But those communities that had such a drastic change done to their constituency never had a chance to have input.

When there's such a drastic change between the interim report and the final report, the commission couldn't have had input on that because nobody had any clue that it would even have happened. If there had been some slight adjustments to boundaries here and there, just a little bit of cleaning up, I mean, that's one thing. But when you totally take out a constituency and put back in a constituency, that's pretty drastic. When you change the size of a riding from probably 20,000 square kilometres to about 60,000 square kilometres, that's a big difference. When you lump communities that are totally unrelated, where there's no travel or trading corridor between them, and you put them together and those communities never had a chance to have input on that or share their feelings with the commission on that, those are drastic things. Those are things that just aren't right.

Now, my constituency isn't even the largest constituency by geography. It's huge, yeah. I think I counted that there are about 71 different communities in this new constituency – 71 – and eight different MDs and counties. Now, I know that one of the things they were supposed to do in this report was to take in natural boundaries of MDs and counties, but they didn't even do that with this. I mean, of those eight MDs and counties, there are parts of three or four of them and all of some of them. It's just a mishmash of everything there.

This committee's report only wants to make these rural Alberta constituencies bigger. I can't fathom it, which is why we must refrain from reading this bill a second time. Effective representation also implies that the local issues require local solutions. Who is better suited to address them than someone that's local? The minority report from Commissioner Gwen Day of the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission states that the new constituencies need to account for "common community interests and community organizations." As I just mentioned, there's no relativity to these communities that are now lumped together. How can a member be expected to understand the needs of his or her entire constituency when it's so big that these interests conflict?

Urban centres don't struggle with this problem as much as rural constituencies do. To some degree representatives in cities like Calgary and Edmonton are interchangeable because they are close enough to each other where matters under provincial jurisdiction are similar. But what about outside these centres? How big is too big when it comes to these constituencies?

Grande Prairie-Smoky, the existing constituency, is a district that includes both an urban and a rural component, and it's peppered with amazing little communities in between. But it also includes the

northern half of one of Alberta's largest cities. The population was a good-sized population in that constituency. The thing is that with that constituency there was a natural trading corridor from the rural area around Grande Prairie to Grande Prairie. People outside of Grande Prairie, if they want to go to a Walmart or a Costco or one of those big box stores or if there are some specialty stores in Grande Prairie that don't exist in smaller communities, then they would go to Grande Prairie. There was a relativity. The people in Grande Prairie, a lot of them worked outside of Grande Prairie in a rural area, in the oil and gas sector or the forestry or farming industry.

There was a lot of relativity in that area, but the way the constituencies are now, they've taken away that, that opportunity that these communities – before, in the existing constituency, there was some sort of relativity. There was some sort of common interest. There was some sort of common bond there. But that's been taken away when you take communities that are four and a half hours apart.

On one hand, you have a strong energy component in Grande Prairie upon which our provincial economy depends. On the other hand, there is an agricultural component, also vital to our success as a province. What do the needs of my constituents in Grande Prairie have in common with the people of New Fish Creek, a rural community an hour and a half to the east? They're in a similar trading corridor. The people from New Fish Creek go to Grande Prairie and shop. The people in Grande Prairie, some of them, might work in the New Fish Creek area or some of the other communities around in the oil and gas sector or whatever. But they both deserve equal representation in this House. That's why we must not read this bill a second time.

At this time I'd like to move to adjourn debate.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Mason: Madam Speaker, I believe that we have made progress, however incremental, this evening. As we had a late night last night, I'm pleased to move that we adjourn the House until 9 o'clock tomorrow morning.

Thank you.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10 p.m.]

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