

4:13 p.m.

Wednesday, June 26, 2002

[Mr. Clark in the chair]

The Chair: Well, John, we want to welcome you. On a personal note it's very good to see you again. It's amazing how you run across people from time to time; isn't it? I do obviously commend you for taking the time to take part in this. The numbers in Fort McMurray are a little underwhelming. Nevertheless, we are here and we do want to hear your best advice.

Just really four quick comments, John. First of all, we will have an interim report ready some time in the early part of September and then have a look at that. There'll be another set of hearings in December or Januaryish, and then a final report will be in the Speaker's hands next March.

The mandate the commission has is we are to take the 2001 stats from the Stats Canada census and the population of Alberta. Divide that by 83 – because there are going to be 83 ridings again – and that comes out to 35,951. Obviously, there are variances, as you know.

Now, of my colleagues on the panel, who you've already met, two are appointed by the Leader of the Opposition in consultation and two are appointed by the Executive Council, and there's the Ethics Commissioner for Alberta. I guess it was his turn to be the chairman, so that's likely how come I'm chairman.

What we would like to do is to have you tell us what you think would be most appropriate and anything else, and then we'd like to ask you some questions. This is a pretty unique part of the world, and the riding you're in now is one of the two special ridings in Alberta – isn't it? – and you'll be able to reflect upon the situation as to how unique it is or how it's worked or how it hasn't worked.

So with that welcome, John, we look forward to hearing from you.

Mr. Rigney: All right. I'm here because a resident of Fort Chip named Leonard Flett was invited to come but couldn't make it. He asked me to show up here.

I haven't been involved in politics very much until recently, although I've worked for local politicians for 20 years. The last time the boundaries were redrawn – I can't remember what year it was, but it was in the '80s, I think. Prior to that, we voted in the Fort McMurray riding, and we appealed to not be taken out of the Fort McMurray riding, but we were told that other people were wiser than us.

Fort Chip over the years developed relationships with key people in Edmonton and Fort McMurray. The leaders of Fort Chip in the '70s and '80s became quite influential in the development of that part of the province, which has very little development. The economy has collapsed there. In the past 10 or 15 years our municipal boundaries were redrawn, our federal and provincial boundaries were redrawn, and the effect is that our local politics have been dismantled by those things because we've lost contact with our elected reps, and that's what got me interested in coming here. I'll read what I wrote.

I don't have the numbers with me, but I looked at the numbers in the ridings. I think Fort McMurray's riding has more electors than the average and Athabasca has much less than the average, and to add more to McMurray seems to be eating away at the level of representation. However, there are unusual circumstances here. I think the voting population north of here is less than a thousand people. I think that in Fort Chip 540 people voted in the municipal election. That must have been about a hundred percent turnout. The municipality thought there were only 440 voters, and we had 545 show up.

The Chair: That's not Chicago; is it?

Mr. Rigney: Fort MacKay probably has 250 voters, and there might be 20 others living in the countryside. The area is 25,000 square miles north of here if you exclude the national park.

Fort Chipewyan's links are almost exclusively with Fort McMurray. Our employment, our supply centre, our families are primarily in Fort McMurray. The municipal government is in McMurray. Our road and air links are to McMurray. We know McMurray: its people, its businesses, its economy, and its politicians. We have very little in common with the Athabasca area: no agriculture, no forestry, no contacts, no employment, no friends or relatives. Athabasca is closer to Calgary than to Fort Chip and much more expensive to reach from Fort Chip and much more time consuming to get there.

Then also Fort MacKay. I don't know Fort MacKay as well, but it's the geographic centre of the tar sands industry. It's impacted daily by decisions made in Fort McMurray. Fort MacKay is overgrown by thousands of construction and plant workers, and almost all of them vote in Fort McMurray, Redwater, or Edmonton, wherever they live. So Fort MacKay is linked almost like an umbilical cord to Fort McMurray. Everything that happens there is related to what happens here. Again most of us from Fort MacKay and Fort Chip see Athabasca once in a lifetime. We're in Fort McMurray constantly.

The whole region north of McMurray is being increasingly impacted by pollution, recreation users, and construction projects all tied to Fort McMurray. Any Fort McMurray MLA who's elected will inevitably be drawn to strongly supporting the tar sands expansion projects. Fort MacKay and Fort Chip have to live with the consequences of that. At Fort Chip we're seeing increasing river pollution. We're worrying about the amount of water being drawn out of the river, because Fort Chip is a marine community completely dependent on the water. In the region where the new plants are going in, it's a very fragile environment. It's sand. It's a big desert with trees, jack pines instead of cactuses, and active stretches of sand dunes that are actually growing, and the whole region will ultimately, with the climate changing, probably turn into a big drifting desert. We're concerned about the effect that the recreation users from Fort McMurray on their ATVs are having, the amount of damage they're doing to the environment, the amount of fish and wildlife they're killing.

What other impacts? Well, I'll just say that north of here we feel a huge impact from the Fort McMurray expansion, but our MLA, being elected only for the city of Fort McMurray, is almost bound to embrace the oil sands development regardless of the impacts. We think that if there were a thousand voters north of here in his constituency, we could put a lot of pressure on the local MLA to consider the environmental impacts of what's happening, where an MLA out of the Athabasca district, around the town of Athabasca or wherever they might live, is going to be more concerned with the forestry projects and agriculture and know very little about what's happening downstream from McMurray.

When the boundaries were redrawn in the last 10 or 15 years, a lot of the Fort Chip leaders and politicians saw that as a conspiracy, because all three districts were redrawn to make us so remote from the bodies we were electing that we lost our ability to manage our own communities' development. I think that if you talk to the people who've been in politics in Fort Chip in the last 30 years, they would say that they think Fort Chip had developed way too much influence for its size and put so much pressure on some of its politicians that that was taken away from us. That's how people would say it in Fort Chip. They feel that it was a deliberate move by the provincial government primarily to stop Fort Chip from being so influential, and it's worked. It's pretty well disenfranchised us.

There's really no interest anymore in the provincial elections there. I'm sure you'd see a 10 or 15 percent turnout for a provincial election there and 95 percent for municipal, because we have the chance to elect two municipal councillors there.

That's about all I have to say.

4:23

The Chair: Okay. Thanks, John, very much.

Mr. Clegg: Well, thanks, John. As you know, we have difficult decisions to make. What we've got in your case and what you've been talking about, John, is a city, Fort McMurray, that has a population of about 8 percent above the average, and then you have another constituency that your area is represented by that's getting close to only – well, I think it's 42 percent down. Now, there's our dilemma. As you know, there can be special ridings. That's fine. You don't have to answer this, but where could we possibly draw a line that would be good? I certainly see your concern. I mean, everything you do is in Fort McMurray. It's only reasonable that you'd do that, but if you were sitting in our chair, do you think that there's anywhere that we could draw some lines that would make it good for the communities or the cities or the rural residents and that would make some common sense? We haven't even started to draw any lines yet, but what we should be doing is always in the back in of our mind. So, obviously, if you added let's just say a thousand – and I have no idea of the numbers – then we're looking at a bigger percentage plus a long way from the Legislature. So is there anything that you believe could be done to try and equalize?

Mr. Rigney: Well, if you were to draw a line straight across here and add all of that northern part, you add a thousand people to this riding and you take them out of the Athabasca riding. I don't remember the numbers for the Lac La Biche, Redwater, and Barrhead ridings, but could not the boundaries of those be adjusted to put some more people in the Athabasca riding? Athabasca itself is primarily agriculture and forestry. Fort Chip is going to be tourism and a national park, and Fort Chip itself has to somehow prevent the river and the delta and the lake from being destroyed before we get a road there. There are so few people there, yet maybe Barrhead, Redwater, and Lac La Biche are all low in numbers too. I'm not sure. But I would think that those communities in that area have a lot more in common with Athabasca than the region north of here does.

Mr. Clegg: Thank you. I'm certainly not here to argue. I agree with you. But when you're driving from Athabasca up here to Fort McMurray, we've got lots of wilderness, as you know and so do we know. There wouldn't be a lot of people when you leave the city of Fort McMurray until you get within – I'm just guessing – 30 or 40 miles of Athabasca. Am I not right that there'd be very few people?

Mr. Rigney: Well, I guess it would start at Wandering River, because agriculture has moved in there.

The Chair: Wandering River?

Mr. Rigney: Yeah. Wandering River would be where the population starts. It's turning to farmland.

Mr. Clegg: And how far would that be from Athabasca, roughly?

Mr. Rigney: Wandering River would be – let's see – about 100 kilometres from Boyle, and Boyle is probably 50 or 80 kilometres from Athabasca.

Mr. Clegg: So we're looking at 150 kilometres. Okay. Thanks.

Mr. Rigney: I would think that probably 90 percent of the population of the Athabasca riding is south of Fort McMurray.

Mr. Clegg: Oh, for sure.

Mr. Rigney: Less than 10 percent of the population of the Athabasca riding is north of McMurray.

Mr. Clegg: By adding on to Fort McMurray going north – and I mean, I understand it – they're still plus. You're plus eight now, so you might go up to plus 10 or 11 or 12. I don't know without figuring it out. Certainly it's only reasonable that your residents north of Fort McMurray would do their business and their pleasures and everything in Fort McMurray. There's no question.

Mr. Rigney: Yes, and McMurray may add another 15,000 or 20,000 voters by the next round of boundary adjustments. It looks like we're heading to 70,000 population. We're 45,000 now. Our plans are all to have infrastructure for 70,000 people within five or six years, so McMurray is growing very, very fast right now.

Mr. Clegg: Thank you, John.

Mr. Patterson: Thank you very much, John, for taking the time to come out here today. So what you're suggesting here is that we leave the Athabasca-Wabasca boundary the same but draw a line at, say, Wandering River, somewhere around there, and then take all the rest of it right up to the Northwest Territories boundary and include the city of Fort McMurray, and that would become the new constituency.

Mr. Rigney: Something like that. I can't speak to where you would draw the boundary if you drew it south of McMurray because there are several small communities south of McMurray, between McMurray and Lac La Biche, and I'm not sure if they feel closer to Lac La Biche or closer to McMurray or what.

Mr. Patterson: And if I might, Mr. Chair. Do you have any suggestions for a name for that constituency if we did that?

Mr. Rigney: Yeah. Wood Buffalo would be great.

Mr. Patterson: Okay.

Mr. Rigney: We like Wood Buffalo in Fort Chip because we're Wood Buffalo, not Fort McMurray. It makes us feel that, hey, we can use that name for our purposes.

Mr. Patterson: Sure. Thank you very much.

The Chair: John, where's the bottom part of Wood Buffalo municipality?

Mr. Rigney: Oh, it goes as far as Conklin, Janvier. I think Janvier is the southernmost community. Or is it Conklin?

The Chair: And how does that compare to Wandering River? Is Conklin south of that?

Mr. Rigney: I've never driven that highway. I've only flown in there, so I'm not sure where it is. It would be on your maps.

The Chair: Sure. We can find that out.

Mr. Rigney: Conklin has to be at least halfway to Lac La Biche. I think it's a long way.

The Chair: And that's the southern boundary of Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Rigney: Yeah. That's our southernmost community. It's a huge area, Wood Buffalo municipality.

The Chair: Just on a purely personal note. How many councillors for Wood Buffalo?

Mr. Rigney: Ten councillors and a mayor.

The Chair: And how many are from Fort McMurray, and how many are from outside?

Mr. Rigney: There are six from ward 1, which is McMurray. There are two from ward 2, which is MacKay and Fort Chip basically. There's one from Sapræ Creek, which is a subdivision north of town here, sort of an acreage kind of thing, and there's one from the communities south of Fort McMurray. So McMurray city has six, the rural areas have four, and of those rural areas one of those, Sapræ Creek, is not really rural. It's where the lawyers and the accountants live.

The Chair: Okay. Mr. Graham, being a lawyer, would you like to ask the next question?

4:33

Mr. Graham: I just wanted to thank you very much for all the trouble you've taken to come down here. You've given this a great deal of thought. I just wanted to extend my thanks. I think some of your suggestions are very interesting.

Mr. Rigney: Thank you.

Ms Mackay: I was just going to ask you what the population of Wood Buffalo municipal district is minus Fort McMurray city. Like, what's the rest of it?

Mr. Rigney: Five thousand.

Ms Mackay: Five thousand?

Mr. Rigney: If McMurray is 45,000, the rural area would be 5,000 or less. Fort Chip is a thousand, Fort MacKay is about 500, Anzac about 500 or 600, Conklin about 300, and Janvier probably 400 or 500. So 9 or 10 percent of the population of the region is rural here, outside the city.

The Chair: Okay. Any other questions or comments?

John, I'd just like to echo the comments Mr. Graham and others made. Thank you very much for taking the time and the effort. We've been thinking about what to do in this corner of the province. I think you've given us some excellent food for thought, and that's very much appreciated. Thank you very, very much.

Mr. Rigney: Thank you. I'll leave a copy of the letter too.

The Chair: Okay. Good. Just give it to Doug back there, and he'll see that we all get copies of it.

We're now adjourned until further call. Let's go over and look at the map.

[The commission adjourned from 4:34 p.m. to 4:53 p.m.]

The Chair: Our next presenter is Bill Almdal. Bill is from Fort McMurray and has told me that he's going to be speaking as himself, not representing any particular group. He's one of those people who knows the area, knows what's going on. We look forward to your insights, Bill. Thank you very much for coming.

Mr. Almdal: Thank you. A little bit of background on my work here. As I said, I am representing myself at this point in time. I deal with all of the issues in the region and have worked and lived up here since 1973. I actually moved up here in '83, but I've been working here since 1973. As part of my job I get confidential information from all of the resource developers as to their capital plans, production plans, manpower, workforce, you name it, and roll it up into the big picture, and part of that output to service the community is a population model. We have been doing this since 1997. So in total numbers, when we test against actuals, we're within 1 and a half percent of the actual numbers, so we're quite pleased at the accuracy of the model. Age groups, no. We sometimes miss that, but overall we've done a good job.

So what I want to talk to you today about is what is actually happening in, one, the political scene with our two MLAs in the region and then what the population model indicates to you. First of all, our two MLAs, Mike Cardinal and Guy Boutillier, have an arrangement so that Guy really looks after everything associated with the oil sands, which includes most of the municipality of Wood Buffalo. Sure, we invite Mike up, but if anything comes up, he'll turn it over to Guy. So in reality Guy is now looking after pretty well the entire region of the municipality. We've seen that in many meetings. We'll invite them both up, but it's really Guy that reacts to the issues within the municipality, not just the city of Fort McMurray but the entire municipality.

Now, the other one is from the population scenario. We believe we're about 46,000 right now. There is a census going on now, and the turnout is very good. They have 80 percent penetration right now and hope to hit about 93 percent within another week; comparable to when they first did the federal census, they went out and they had 63 percent penetration and had to come back and redo it.

Our population model is used by the municipality, the school boards, hospital, and Keyano College for their projections on where to build. We give them two numbers. One is the maximum: if all of the projects proceed, we can see a population of greater than 75,000 people here, and that is by about the year 2016 in the most optimistic scenario. If we look at what we feel is a reasonable scenario, then in about 2011 we're looking at about 54,000, 55,000. Now, none of the projects this past year have been canceled. Some have been slowed down a bit, but every project is being worked on and moving. So we can see that, yes, we'll hit that 75,000. Don't know quite when, but we'll hit that. So it's a growth.

One of the scenarios we thought about is that since Guy is already really looking after the municipality of Wood Buffalo, change the boundaries to reflect that. Also, that would set it up so that in the future when we start getting into the 60,000, 65,000, you can split into two again and have two MLAs representing the region if the numbers so warrant. But it is a rapid growth, and as I say, since we started tracking this in 1997, we're tracking dead on, and it's scary. Both the production and the population is growing according to our forecast.

Briefly, that is the summary. Again, if Guy now in reality is

looking after the entire municipality, why not make that official?

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's straight and to the point. Mr. Patterson.

Mr. Patterson: Yes, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much for coming, Bill. Apparently, from what I understand, there's part of the municipality that's north of Wood Buffalo in Athabasca-Wabasca that runs up to the Northwest Territories boundary. If that were included, what would your reaction to that be?

The Chair: What are we talking about?

Mr. Almdal: Well, that's the municipality.

Mr. Patterson: It goes all the way to the Northwest Territories?

Mr. Almdal: Right to the Northwest Territories and the Saskatchewan border.

Mr. Patterson: Well, okay.

Mr. Almdal: It's right south of Fort Smith. Fort Smith is in the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Patterson: Okay. I'm mixed up. I'm sorry.

Mr. Almdal: Right. That's about 400 kilometres by air from here, and you go to Conklin, which is south of here, the other community, and that's 150 kilometres. It's a huge area, but the number is about 5,000 to 6,000 people outside of McMurray, so it's not a big number of people. For Mike to carry it from his office down in Athabasca, in that area, good grief, he's got a huge distance to cover.

Mr. Patterson: I was mistaken. I've got it clear in my mind now.

Mr. Almdal: Okay. We can show you on the map over there, I think, the full extent of it.

Mr. Patterson: I had a mental lapse, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Almdal: It's too warm here.

Mr. Clegg: Plus he's from southern Alberta.

You know our dilemma, that if you took in the whole municipality of Wood Buffalo, I believe, without knowing the numbers exactly, you would probably be at the maximum. Obviously, we can go within 25 percent, but you'd be very close to the maximum if my calculation is right. Then by taking it away, what you'd be doing is taking away from Athabasca-Wabasca, obviously. As you know, now Athabasca-Wabasca is almost – we can have four ridings, as you know, within 50 percent. But by taking them away, I believe that they would be more than the 50 percent allowable.

Mr. Almdal: Under it.

Mr. Clegg: Well, yeah, under. I don't think you'd be over the allowance today, but you say down the line. We were hoping for some magic from you that would say how we can kind of balance it out, but I personally don't see how you can balance it. To me it doesn't make any sense that Mike should represent anything north of Fort McMurray, because the whole traffic from MacKay and . . .

Mr. Almdal: Even Fort Chip, MacKay, Janvier, Anzac.

Mr. Clegg: Everything they do would be obviously to Fort McMurray.

Mr. Almdal: Right. The other way you can do it is to give us two MLAs right now, and you'd still be within your limit.

Mr. Clegg: There's always a possibility of anything, you know.

The Chair: Bill, am I putting words in your mouth if I say that if we went to the municipality boundaries, despite the fact you would be at a very high end of the scale, you think that would by and large be acceptable in the municipality of Wood Buffalo?

Mr. Almdal: Yes, it is. I can't speak for the municipality, and I'm not too sure if they're going to show up here. They might. But they are of the same thinking, that they would like to align the boundaries for the MLA to it. Again, that's just from this point of view. That's hearsay, and they'd have to say that themselves. I can't speak on behalf of them.

The Chair: But from the broad sense of the community, you think that's something that the community would accept?

Mr. Almdal: Yes, I believe it would be acceptable by the community.

The Chair: Bauni.

Ms Mackay: No. I mean, I know what you're saying and understand why.

The Chair: Doug is writing frantically here, Glen, so you carry on.

Mr. Clegg: I'm just going to carry on a little more. Do you think there's any warrant to take in everything north of Fort McMurray and make it a riding and maybe cut Fort McMurray? The south end, not down the middle of the city. I'm just trying to throw something out that makes sense to us and follows the legislation that we must follow. I'm just trying to get something that maybe your Mr. Magic can do.

Mr. Almdal: Well, let's take a look at just the numbers again. If you look at the around 5,000 people, which includes First Nations outside of Fort McMurray, I would say that two-thirds of those are north of Fort McMurray and about one-third are south of Fort McMurray, so it's not that big. Now, with Fort McMurray I include Samprae Creek because that's already in the riding of Fort McMurray. There are a few hundred people in that hamlet. So we're not talking that much in numbers if you include it all. You might have, as I say, maybe another 1,000 people south of Fort McMurray that you'd add in, and I don't think that's going to bother too many people.

Mr. Clegg: So if you added 5,000, you'd be looking at roughly 43,000 to 44,000 with our figures that we're working with, which is allowable, but keep in mind that the MLA has a long distance to travel to the Legislature, and we always kind of try and take that into consideration. You know, we argue one side of the story, that if you've got a long distance to travel to the Legislature – I do know, but you can correct me, that you have good air service to the city, which some ridings haven't, so maybe we could warrant it. I'm just

thinking out loud. That's all I doing.

5:03

Mr. Almdal: I could stand to be corrected, but I believe the numbers are in the tens of thousands of landings at the airport in a month. It's quite remarkable.

The Chair: Doug.

Mr. Graham: I don't really have any questions. I just want to thank you, Bill, for coming out. I'm very glad to see him because Bill is a very bright person. I've known him for a long time, and he also knows this area tremendously well, so thank you.

Mr. Almdal: You're more than welcome.

The Chair: I guess, Bill, the part that I take from this is that if we take your recommendation of having the Wood Buffalo municipality as one constituency despite the fact that it's at the high end, you think the people in the area would support that.

Mr. Almdal: Yes, I would think they would, very much so. In any conversation that I've had, they wonder why it's not that way.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Almdal: And the second one. I don't know whether you can or not, but at the next review of the boundaries seriously look at splitting it and having two because of the growth, if it materializes as we believe it will.

Mr. Clegg: But you'll be out of the country by then, by the time we finish this one.

Mr. Almdal: Right. Gone.

The Chair: Well, the last boundaries commission I think made some comments – didn't they? – about how they should consider one or two seats here or there or somewhere. Not here but for someplace in the province they said: we're going to wait and see if what's predicted is going to happen. So maybe we can take the same route there.

Mr. Almdal: That's right.

The Chair: Thank you very, very much, Bill. We appreciate it very much.

Mr. Almdal: Okay. You're more than welcome. Thank you for entertaining my verbal submission then.

The Chair: We're adjourned now until further notice.

[The commission adjourned at 5:05 p.m.]

