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Chair: The Honourable Bardish Chagger



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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 48 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

[*English*]

As it is our first meeting and we're still in January of 2023, I wish everyone a happy new year. I'm containing my excitement—but I have so much—to be doing this again with all of you.

The committee is meeting today to begin its study on electoral boundary reports. We will begin by considering the draft reports for Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador, and then pause. I understand that we've all gone through the two reports. There are no changes and we can pass them as they have been provided to us.

I see a nodding of heads. That's brilliant. We will proceed.

Thank you to the analysts for doing tremendous work, as always.

We also need to pass the three budgets for the studies. I'm going to make sure that we're okay with the budget expenses. It's about \$1,500 each. You don't have them. We'll circulate them. It's the budget that we would normally pass, as we usually do. We should really talk about the food that we receive, but today is not that day. Are we okay?

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: That's perfect.

We should also welcome Miriam. Miriam will be the clerk who will be supporting our committee moving forward. We will have a bit of duplication for a bit. I really do want to thank Justin for his leadership in bringing us to this point.

Justin, I gave you a shout-out in the House yesterday. I really do appreciate your being available. I don't work nine to five and you have been available to me outside of nine to five, so I really do thank you. You should never be a stranger to PROC. I understand that we're going to have you for this month before you're really gone. Please don't go away too quickly.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Luckily, we get to keep Andre and Laurence. Welcome back to our analysts.

Now, we will actually proceed to hearing witnesses and colleagues to discuss the reports. First, we will start with New Brunswick, followed by Nova Scotia. Let's be efficient, as we usually are at this committee.

Today, I would like to welcome Mr. John Williamson to our committee. Mr. Williamson and I once sat beside each other at a committee, and it was a great conversation.

Mr. Williamson, I understand that you've been provided with six questions that the committee would like you to address. Hopefully, you can do that within your comments. I see that you've come prepared. Use your time as one of our honourable colleagues. You will have up to five minutes to share the comments you'd like to share. Any questions of those six that were provided to you that you might not hit upon we'll try to get within the question-and-answer round.

With that, I will pass the floor over to you for up to five minutes. Welcome to PROC.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I appreciate being here today.

I'd like to, first of all, thank members of this committee for hearing me today. I also want to recognize the New Brunswick commission for its work in the redistribution process.

Although I am bringing forth an objection today, I want to note that I think the commission did a very good job respecting our communities of interest, creating ridings of a reasonable and comparable size, and listening to citizens with recommendations for the 10 proposed riding maps.

The crux of my objection is that I don't believe the proposed new name of "Saint John—St. Croix" accurately reflects the whole of the riding outlined in the report. The current name of New Brunswick Southwest should continue to be used, as it has almost continuously since 1997.

I state this because most of the communities in the riding will not identify with the "Saint John—St. Croix" label. Within the riding there are multiple communities that do not lie near the St. Croix River, nor are they part of Saint John.

These include areas like Belleisle, Apohaqui and Studholm in the east of the riding near and towards Sussex; as well as St. George, Maces Bay and Blacks Harbour in the east of Charlotte County, which is in the southern part of the riding; plus Tracy and Fredericton Junction in Sunbury County, which is south of Fredericton; as well as Gagetown in the northeast of the riding.

Moreover, some of our province's oldest communities to the south, namely Campobello Island, Deer Island, Grand Manan Island and White Head Island—four important islands—are also completely overlooked by this new name. They should certainly be represented in the riding description.

Meanwhile, the name New Brunswick Southwest accurately reflects the whole of the region being represented, including the additions. I believe the name New Brunswick Southwest should continue to be used. Most of the regions lying within the proposed boundaries of Saint John—St. Croix are already being represented under the name New Brunswick Southwest.

The two major areas that are being added, Burton Parish, which is to the east of Fredericton, as well as the west side of the City of Saint John lie westerly and southerly of areas that are already part of New Brunswick Southwest. I believe you've been handed maps that will illustrate this. It might not be obvious, but the additions are there. The rest of the riding is the same: New Brunswick Southwest.

It's for these reasons that I contend that it is appropriate in this case to continue to use New Brunswick Southwest. It's a name that is known province-wide. It is known by the voters who fall within both the existing as well as the proposed new riding.

As well, I'm just going to quote, to end this, from page 11 of the commission's own report, which noted "that the Commission had sought to retain the current riding names wherever appropriate". I believe it is more than appropriate to maintain the name New Brunswick Southwest because of its history and its accuracy. I also think it's a name that people understand. They live within it, and it represents them.

I will turn briefly to some of these questions. Obviously there's no demographic impact here. I have talked to a number of mayors and councillors about the name. I think there's broad agreement that New Brunswick Southwest has worked very well to include the many communities that make up this large rural riding, and it could continue to be used.

On that note, I will end. I look forward to your questions, if you have any. I hope you will consider my request and that you support that we maintain the name New Brunswick Southwest.

Thank you.

• (1110)

The Chair: Mr. Williamson, we thank you for that presentation and for taking the time to appear in front of this committee and to share those comments.

I will just note for colleagues that the map that was referred to as being shared is not entirely in the two official languages. As you know, I've been consistent on that stance. Until something is entire-

ly in two official languages, we will not circulate it to this committee, but we will—

Mr. John Williamson: It is in the two official languages. Some cities just don't have translation, but you can see that Bay of Fundy is *baie de Fundy*.

The Chair: What is the country that is south of us?

Mr. John Williamson: Okay, but—

The Chair: I'm pretty confident that when we... It's a point. I think as a country with two official languages, it is something that we just need to be consistent on.

We appreciate it. We can circulate it around. We'll make sure it's in two official languages so that people can see it. I just don't want committee members to wonder why, so I will provide you with that reason.

We will now go into six-minute rounds. Obviously, we're amongst colleagues, so we can be a little bit more informal here as long as we make sure that one person is speaking at a time and that for the purpose of interpretation we don't interrupt.

We now get to start with Mr. Perkins.

Welcome to PROC.

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to be here and a pleasure to hear from our colleagues.

Mr. Williamson, I don't know if you know this or not, but I was born in Saint John, New Brunswick. Even though I represent a Nova Scotia riding, I have some familiarity with it.

Obviously, in terms of the renaming of your riding as proposed by the commission, the province of New Brunswick contains both the city of Saint John and the river of Saint John. In their trying to figure this out in their naming, do you think perhaps they got confused? Were they thinking it was just the river, and therefore they'd name part of the river since that's a dividing line now in their proposal? Was that part of the confusion?

Mr. John Williamson: You're onto something. There is, of course, the Saint John River, but New Brunswick residents are quite specific. We refer to Saint John as Saint John. Given that the commissioner's report is proposing to have Saint John the city represented by two members of Parliament, the understanding, or I think the perception out there, is that it's referring to the city of Saint John.

To finish my thought here, New Brunswick households and individuals are quite specific. When we talk about “the river”, we’re referring to Saint John River. The St. Croix River is called “St. Croix” by the community. There is no confusion. Everyone knows what it is. It’s the river that separates New Brunswick from Maine. If you say “Saint John” to a New Brunswick voter, they’ll assume that you mean the city, not the river.

Even if the commissioners meant the river, I still think my objection holds in that there are still large parts of this riding that are far from the river. In particular, that’s in the east of the riding: Sunbury County, which is south of Fredericton, as well as those four islands that I mentioned in the Bay of Fundy.

I’ll also point out that even a reference to Saint John River is contentious, as currently there are campaigns by indigenous and other groups to rename the Saint John River as Wolastoq, which is a traditional indigenous name. In my opinion, it would not be wise for the redistribution commission to get involved in this debate on either side. Even renaming it Saint John to mean the river, I think, is entering a debate that is currently ongoing in the province.

● (1115)

Mr. Rick Perkins: We have a St. Croix River, a Saint John River, a city of Saint John, but no town or village of St. Croix. There’s a lot of confusion in the media too on this, and the commission.... Is that part of it or...?

Mr. John Williamson: First of all, it’s pronounced “St. Croy”, although this riding was briefly referred to as, originally.... Just for a little history lesson, Saint Croix Island is the place where Champlain spent his first winter, but now, in the local dialect, it is referred to as “St. Croy”. It would tug on my ears to hear this riding referred to as “St. Croix” in the House of Commons, so that is another danger.

I know that could happen, because briefly this riding was referred to as St. Croix—Belleisle, but every time the Speaker recognized former member Greg Thompson, he asked for the member from St. Croix—Belleisle. I always wondered who this member from Quebec was until Greg stood up, of course. That is why Greg promptly reversed the name when he was a member of Parliament to get it back to New Brunswick Southwest.

Let me address what I’ll call a bit of confusion about what actually makes up New Brunswick Southwest. In the local media, when these maps were released, the media really just referred to the area between Saint John and St. Croix as forming New Brunswick Southwest. It was a bit infuriating for me, knowing that the riding includes much more geography than that, but I also noticed that reporters kept referring to only Charlotte County and Saint John as being part of the new riding, which is false.

I do worry that the name being proposed inaccurately describes what is this large rural riding, whereas this part of the province is referred to either by its current federal riding name, New Brunswick Southwest, or even informally as southwest New Brunswick. “Sou’west New Brunswick” is what you heard in the docks, so again, this name is accurate from a cultural point of view and a geographical point of view. “New Brunswick Southwest” also accurately includes all of the voters, all of the communities and all

of the municipalities that currently make up and will make up the new riding after April 2024.

Thank you for your questions, Mr. Perkins.

The Chair: Thank you for that fruitful exchange.

Ms. Sahota, you have up to six minutes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thanks for presenting here today, Mr. Williamson.

Your reasoning is understandable. I can understand why you wouldn’t want to create confusion for the residents of your riding of New Brunswick Southwest. On the name, however, the electoral boundaries commission argues that this is a more historically appropriate name.

My first question is about what you would say in response to that and whether you think it would be appropriate to have the commission give their reasoning.

Mr. John Williamson: You could certainly ask them. I of course would never shy away from that discussion.

Look, there’s no doubt that the names St. Croix and Saint John are historically significant—St. Croix because it is the boundary line between the United States and Canada, and Saint John because it’s our country’s first incorporated city.

These are important historical places and, as I said in a previous answer, Saint Croix Island is important not just for this riding but for all of Canada, and for French-speaking Canadians in particular, being the first settlement ahead of even Quebec City. It is an important part of our country’s history, but that doesn’t mean it accurately reflects this riding. Saint Croix Island, at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy, is recognized by Parks Canada for that settlement. Saint John is its municipality. While I think these are important historical places, I don’t think that automatically means we should apply them to a riding.

What I’ve learned about this riding, to give you a sense of it, is that it covers approximately 10,000 square kilometres and its largest municipality has about 6,000 people. The riding is really a lot of small communities. Grand Manan has 2,000 people. Campobello has 900 people, and White Head has a couple of dozen. I could go on, but you can understand that once you get past the three municipalities of 6,000, the size falls to 2,000 and then just hundreds. It has many communities, and as I travelled the riding, particularly when I first started, the thing that kept coming back to me was that people struggle a bit about why they’re part of New Brunswick Southwest and not Fredericton, not Saint John, not Sussex or whatever.

“New Brunswick Southwest” is a name that I think binds people together. These symbols are important. I do worry that if we adopt the name “Saint John—St. Croix” a large number of municipalities are just going to feel that they're not represented by the label. While that won't make a difference in terms of representation and how I vote, I think it does have a symbolic value that's important.

• (1120)

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

As many MPs do, it seems as though you know your riding very well, and of course you want to be inclusive and represent that riding. Your arguments are very familiar to me, because these arguments were also raised with Bill S-207, brought forward by MP Shanahan regarding Châteauguay—Lacolle. Very similar arguments were made because Lacolle didn't happen to be a part of her riding. There was debate in the House, and there was a vote after that debate. You voted against her being able to change the name of her riding.

Why would that be? I think it's so important to be able to identify your riding appropriately, but in that instance, you felt it wasn't appropriate for the member to change the name for very similar reasons.

Mr. John Williamson: Are you asking me?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes.

Mr. John Williamson: What are you asking me?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I am asking why you voted against allowing for that name change when it was based on reasons very similar to the ones you're giving here today.

Mr. John Williamson: I think the member you referenced had an opportunity to pocket the win. There was an agreement amongst our whips that it could be carried in a voice vote. The member, I think wrongly, rejected that and compromised that deal, so she took her bill to the whole House. It was not a whipped vote on our side, but our caucus did vote as one.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You're correct. Your caucus did vote as one. Also, the NDP and the Bloc voted nay in that instance. I'm sure throughout this process we're going to hear a lot of people bringing up name changes, and I think it's very important to be able to allow.... From what I understand, the member was not aware that, just previous to her decision on whether to call for a recorded vote or a voice call, this agreement had been made. She was not informed.

Is it just politics, then, or is it important to be able to accomplish the goal of having constituents able to identify themselves as being included in their riding? I think that should be the end goal. Right now we're also using parliamentary resources and parliamentary time to discuss this very important issue, and I'm sure others will come forward. I just don't quite understand why that wasn't allowed for.

Mr. John Williamson: I'm not familiar with the discussions that went back and forth between the House leaders and the whips on that. My view has always been that in Parliament, if you're afforded an opportunity to take the win, you take the win and you pocket it. You don't go to Parliament needlessly to put forward a bill that could have been passed quickly and efficiently. That was the decision of either the member, the whip or the House leader on the gov-

ernment side—I don't know who. That's not up to me, but I voted with my colleagues and, it seems, all opposition members on this.

• (1125)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: But it was not a—

Mr. John Williamson: Let me just finish.

The member should have a chance, perhaps, if she's still interested, to bring this forward in another bill if there's government legislation.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: It was not a whipped vote, so it was essentially up to you, at the end of the day, as to how you voted.

I find that interesting, because I do think your proposal is important.

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you.

Time is up. We appreciate that exchange, as always.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I won't take much time.

We're starting a long process. So I want to use this time to get back to what we need to do as a committee, which is to extract as many objections as possible from each member who is testifying here. I think we already have questions that allow us to go into more depth. So I hope we can be respectful and keep the focus on what we're talking about.

I don't have any follow-up questions at this time about the items my colleague mentioned at the outset, but we often wonder how much of an impact including or excluding certain items can have.

So I'll give my colleague a minute or two to clarify a few things so we can better understand.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you. I'll speak very briefly.

I talked about the difference, in my home province of New Brunswick, between Saint John and the Saint John River. It's kind of like the difference between Quebec and Quebec City. Both names mean something different. It's the same thing where I'm from. If we're talking about the river, it's the Saint John River. If we're talking about the city, it's just Saint John.

So I want to reinforce the message. I think in this case, it's about the city, not the river. As I said, even if it were the river, it still wouldn't make sense to many constituents because there are several islands and municipalities outside the area of the two rivers.

The Chair: Thank you for your intervention, Ms. Gaudreau.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that. I thank the member for coming in and sharing a lot of information about his riding.

I have one question, so it probably won't take us very long. I'm just wondering if you have support from your community's mayors and indigenous leaders with respect to the objection you've brought forward.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you for that question.

Because I'm not proposing any change to the actual boundary—I think the commissioners did a good job working to ensure that New Brunswick's three cities are roughly the same size, in terms of representation, and similarly that the rural ridings are, broadly speaking, equitable—the most I can say to your question, because I've not done broad consultation on the name change, is that I have spoken to individual community leaders and there is broad agreement that New Brunswick Southwest has worked well and people know it, and for that reason there's really no sense in changing it.

As for the question around the Wolastoq and the renaming of the Saint John River, that is a debate that's centred in Fredericton among indigenous groups as well as academics, so it's not one on which I've spoken directly to anyone. However, my sense of the politics is that, because of the questions around renaming of the Saint John River to Wolastoq, this is a contentious issue. I'll put it that way. It's one the commission, I think, would be best to avoid.

If I may take another 30 seconds, I will just say that, as a fiscal conservative as well, I'd be loath to spend the thousands of dollars that would be required on the name change. As do many of you, I have signs on the exterior of my constituency office and signs throughout the riding that bear the name New Brunswick Southwest. I think it would be unfortunate if monies would have to be spent just because we are needlessly making a name change or choosing to go with Saint John—St. Croix, a name that is less representative and one that, if I'm not successful today, I would hopefully continue to try to get to be New Brunswick Southwest. It could be an unfortunate fiscal decision as well.

It's a minor point, I realize. It's not even a drop in the bucket of the federal government's budget, but it's one that I'm cognizant of.

• (1130)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I have no more questions, Chair.

The Chair: Excellent.

I will go around again because we have a little bit of time, but I am just looking at the six questions that were shared with colleagues. Just to maintain some structure and order, as I always endeavour to do at this committee, I feel as though question two is the one that Ms. Blaney just asked. As for question number five, with respect to whether your objection represents an argument that has been repeated before the commission or a new one, I believe, based on your answer, that it was shared with the commission during the first period.

The question I would ask, just to make sure we get it on the record, is whether you have talked to your colleagues about these proposed changes, and, if so, whether they agree.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you.

I talked to only the colleagues who signed the form that was required for this committee to appear. Yes, that is a very good question. I have not consulted with my Liberal colleagues in New Brunswick. That was an oversight. I suspect, just given our good nature back home, they would have no objection to this, but I can't speak to that. However, I do think my concern about the Wolastoq would hit home with Jenica Atwin. She speaks passionately about these issues. She could have the same concern I have, but I have not spoken to her about that.

I have spoken to the Conservatives. They do support it, as do members of my community.

The Chair: Excellent. I thank you for that answer.

We're going to use the time we have with you, which is not much, to go really quickly around once more, starting with Mr. Cooper.

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

It's good to see you, Mr. Williamson.

With respect to Madam Shanahan's bill, I would note that there were other processes available to that member, which she refused to use.

In any event, we're speaking about your riding, Mr. Williamson. Could you remind the committee how long your riding has been called New Brunswick Southwest?

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you.

It's almost continuously since 1997, so that's 25 years. As I mentioned, the New Brunswick commission at one point tried to change that name and did, for an election cycle, change it to St. Croix—Belleisle, pronounced “St. Croy”, which was frequently mispronounced as “St. Croix—Belleisle” here in the House of Commons. It was promptly returned to “New Brunswick Southwest”. I would say that it's been that almost continuously since 1997, for 25 years.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I actually believe—I stand to be corrected—that it was very briefly “Charlotte” at the time of the 1997 election and was then changed to New Brunswick Southwest.

I know you have a map that will soon be distributed to the committee, but again, just to understand the geography of your riding, it really goes from essentially west Saint John all the way to the U.S. border and along the U.S. border. It stretches essentially into communities that are situated near Fredericton and would include counties such as Charlotte, Kings, Queens, York and Sunbury.

Really, from the standpoint of accurately describing where the riding is geographically situated, it is southwest New Brunswick or New Brunswick Southwest. I would also note—and maybe you wish to comment—that York, Sunbury and Charlotte at various times have been included in the names of federal ridings.

• (1135)

Mr. John Williamson: I agree with virtually everything you've said, except that, because of this new proposed name to St. Croix—Saint John, you're making the same oversight that the media makes. This whole area in the east.... Saint John runs to the border, and in fact Saint John would be the centre of the riding. The river kind of runs north from there, so whether you want to choose the city or the river, there's lots of area in the centre. However, in the east as well, it doesn't run from Saint John to the main border. It actually runs from Sussex to the main border.

When the highway was built—I'm being very local now—the Route 1 highway, which was the Atlantic gateway into New England.... That begins in Sussex and runs through what is called, locally, southwest New Brunswick, and the federal riding is New Brunswick Southwest. The current riding name really does speak to the local geography and all the municipalities from Sussex all the way to the main border that are included in southwest New Brunswick or, the federal name of New Brunswick Southwest.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you.

The Chair: Next we have Mr. Calkins, quickly.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Williamson, if you had to choose a path to make your riding inclusive, I think you're choosing to go back to the former riding name, which I think you've made the argument for. Arguments have been made here about the process, but if you were to make that rural riding inclusive in another way, you would have to basically add onto Saint John—St. Croix a number of other smaller communities, which would make a riding name that would take several minutes for the Speaker to get through.

We already have some ridings like that. I'll highlight, for example, that we don't list the neighbourhoods in Brampton in our federal riding names. We have Brampton Centre, Brampton South, Brampton East, Brampton North and Brampton West. It would only seem logical that we would keep doing things in the rural areas as seemingly intelligently as we do things in the urban areas—don't you think?

Mr. John Williamson: I do, and I think that is an excellent point, in that we could add more names to it, which would just make it more cumbersome, but I do want to impress again just how names matter. When we meet someone—a constituent, a voter—it's important that we get their names right and that we pronounce them correctly. The danger with St. Croix is that it will be referred to as “St. Croix”, and that is not correct. It is “St. Croy” in my area.

As I said—I'll just finish up—and I'm not joking, when I heard “St. Croix—Belleisle” when I was watching the House of Commons when Greg was a member after the name changed, I thought it was a Quebec riding until I saw Greg stand, which I think is the reason he changed it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Williamson.

Next is Madam Romanado.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you so much, MP Williamson, for being here today.

I would like to follow up on the question of community support for maintaining the name.

On page 11 of the report it says that, with respect to the changing of the name, it was you and another concerned citizen who had written in to the commission to say that you were not in agreement with changing the name. This report was tabled on June 2, so what kind of outreach have you done, if any, with your community? I'm assuming you've perhaps had a householder, or a ten percenter or something that you've put out in your constituency since June.

Did you reach out to the community and get some support? We didn't receive anything at this committee. Further to your point about keeping the name, we just want to make sure that people in your community are in favour of maintaining the name or are okay with the commission's recommendation.

I'm sorry, but as a Quebecker, I'm going to say Saint John—St. Croix.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Williamson: I understand. In Canada, you can say it in French or in English. Back home, it's in English.

[*English*]

I did not do a ten percenter or a householder survey on this. My discussions have been informal ones with community leaders. I shouldn't say “community leaders”. I think community representatives is a better term. In fishing communities in southwest New Brunswick, they also designate the area “the Sou'west”. As I said, southwestern New Brunswick is one that, outside of politics, encompasses a certain region. That's why I think—and I'm repeating myself—New Brunswick Southwest works. My discussions have been informal and I have found no one who thinks the new riding name is something we should embrace.

• (1140)

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Okay.

If we agree with the commission and they change the name, are we going to receive a whole bunch of letters afterwards? I just want to make sure that we know that some public outreach has been done.

With that I'm going to turn it over to see if any of my colleagues have a follow-up question.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Williamson.

I've long admired your French. As a member from Quebec, I like hearing MPs from outside the province who represent French-speaking communities or populations speak the other official language. Bravo!

My question is about the name of your riding. I fully understand your point of view. You'd like it to keep its name. Perhaps the committee should align with your point of view. I suspect you won't be the only person to suggest keeping or changing the name of a riding to reflect what the people in the community prefer.

That said, I'm a somewhat structured thinker. I don't understand your logic. You're saying that if the name of your riding is changed, people are going to think of Quebec. But that's not the case for St. Albert—Edmonton, which is another place in the country where people speak French. It's the same thing for Saint-Boniface—Saint-Vital. When people pronounce it in English, no one thinks it's in New Brunswick or Ontario. Anglophones will pronounce the names in English; francophones will pronounce them in French.

I don't understand this reasoning. Can you enlighten me?

Mr. John Williamson: Sure. It's very much thanks to the New Brunswick immersion system that I speak French today, and also because I make an effort here in Parliament.

You're touching on a fairly political issue in New Brunswick.

Where I live, in New Brunswick Southwest, there are very few or no francophones. The south is more of an English-speaking region. Moncton is a bilingual city, and there are Acadians in the north. When there is news from Parliament back home, we want two things, that our name and our region's name be properly pronounced when it's on CBC news in New Brunswick or on any station. I'm talking about something local, but I represent the families of New Brunswick Southwest.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gaudreau, the floor is yours.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I feel that my colleague opposite didn't have enough time. He surely wants to reply. I'd like to give him my time.

The Chair: No.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What do you mean no?

• (1145)

The Chair: *[Inaudible]* Mr. Turnbull, if there's any time left.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I had two and a half minutes?

The Chair: Yes, now there are two minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Obviously. That's all I needed. I wanted to offer my time if my colleague wanted to add anything.

[English]

The Chair: Are you passing it to him? Mr. Turnbull wanted to go next. It's taking more time.

[Translation]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you for your kindness, Ms. Gaudreau.

Once again, the francophones of New Brunswick, who are historically Acadians. There are also francophones from outside the country who decide to settle in New Brunswick, because it's the only bilingual province in Canada. It seems to me that francophones will be free to move to your beautiful riding and continue to speak their language. I suppose they'll be allowed to continue to refer to New Brunswick Southwest or Saint John—St. Croix. You're not going to object to that, are you?

Mr. John Williamson: Oh no, absolutely not! I certainly didn't say that.

Simply put, the issue you're addressing isn't necessary. We're well represented. The New Brunswick Southwest poster works very well for us. There's no confusion when you hear the Speaker of the House of Commons.

However, the vast majority of voters in that riding don't care when they hear “St. Croix”. This isn't a place that affects the vast majority. I can safely say that with “New Brunswick Southwest”, they feel well represented.

This is a big debate in New Brunswick. Yes, the province is bilingual—that's not even up for debate—but being bilingual means that, back home, you can speak English or French.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor.

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I have no questions.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney, thank you.

With that, Mr. Williamson, I would like to thank you for your time with the committee. We will make sure that your information is circulated in both official languages. If you have anything else to share, as always, let us know.

With that, we will pause really quickly because our next panel is in person and that should not take too much time.

• (1145)

(Pause)

• (1150)

The Chair: It's great to be back for our second panel on the federal electoral boundaries report. This one is brought to you by Nova Scotia, and I would like to welcome Sean Fraser, Lena Metlege Diab and Jaime Battiste.

Friends and colleagues, you will have up to five minutes for your opening comments. You might hear a beep-beep, which would mean that you had used more than those five minutes. It would be really good if we did not hear the beep-beep.

With that, we are going to start with Minister Sean Fraser.

You have up to five minutes. Welcome to PROC.

Hon. Sean Fraser (Central Nova, Lib.): Thanks very much, colleagues. It's a pleasure to be here with you. I'm here to register my objection formally to the commission's electoral boundaries report for Nova Scotia insofar as it impacts the federal riding of Central Nova and the proposed creation of Pictou-Eastern Shore.

Rick, you'll be familiar with the communities I'm talking about, and perhaps if I could lean on you to let people know what the local dynamics might mean once I make my submissions, that would be helpful.

There are some substantive complaints about rearrangement—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: A point of order, Madam Chair.

Can we ask our colleague to speak more slowly?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's a bad habit on the east coast. We talk too fast.

I have substantial complaints and I have procedural complaints, and I hope you'll consider them in earnest.

On the substantive side, there was a decision made by the commission to separate the communities of Pictou County and Antigonish, which have historical links. There was a decision to annex the entirety of Antigonish County to virtually the entire island of Cape Breton, and there was a decision to extend what's largely a small town and rural community riding into essentially suburban Halifax, which will create difficulties for whoever the member of Parliament will be in the future to effectively represent communities that don't necessarily share interests.

On the procedural side, I was really disappointed, frankly, although I don't think it was a mistake made on purpose, that certain communities including the Pictou Landing First Nation community and important historical African Nova Scotian communities were not given an opportunity to give input, nor were the vast majority of municipalities in the community, which have unanimously indicated their deep dissatisfaction with the process and the result, some of which have actually adopted formal motions. I'm happy to get into that in more detail.

On the substantive side, to people who live there, the separation of Pictou County and Antigonish doesn't make sense. The communities have very similar economies in terms of their reliance on the fishery on the north shore of Nova Scotia, if you can picture the stretch of water between Nova Scotia and P.E.I. In the tourism sector, literally the same organization represents the interests of the Northumberland Strait and the eastern shore of Nova Scotia, which roughly mirror the existing federal constituency now. You'll see that these small towns of somewhere between 2,000 and 4,000 or 5,000 people surrounded by rural communities have very similar backgrounds in terms of their social and economic features.

The decision to attach Antigonish to Cape Breton is, frankly, stunning to me when I actually look at the changes that have been

made to the map, in particular since great changes to the ridings in Cape Breton were not initially proposed. Additionally, Antigonish residents came out in significant numbers and opposed almost unanimously the initial proposal to extend the boundary from Cape Breton into mainland Nova Scotia, because they felt it would be difficult for a person to represent both Antigonish and Cape Breton. The commission recognized this in the report. They said there was some commentary on the strait region in Cape Breton having commonalities with Antigonish. That's true, but then they changed the map to attach Antigonish to almost all of Cape Breton.

What you essentially have now is communities that are five or six hours away from each other in some instances, that have no real common economy or common political issues and that do not attach themselves to one another. If you ask people in Antigonish, they are very much not from Cape Breton, though they love it very much. It simply doesn't make sense.

On the other side of the riding, I'm from northern Nova Scotia and I cover a big part of the Atlantic coast on the northeastern part of the province. There's a decision to make up the population that would extend it closer to the city. The boundary would become essentially Cole Harbour. Rick will appreciate the nuance of this, being on the other side of the city.

The issues that come up in that part of the province deal more with whether they are receiving municipal services from Halifax, the only major city in Nova Scotia, and whether there are public transit stops available for people who commute to the city for work. The economy is largely driven by people who work in the city but live in the area. Further down the eastern shore, which I represent today, a lot of communities are based on the fishery or traditional primary industry or mining, or agriculture if you go into the Musquodoboit Valley.

I have some problems with the name, as well, that I can get to in questions, but I have only about 30 seconds left.

Very quickly on my procedural objection—and I raised this during my presentation to the committee—there are first nations communities that were not consulted and that are not happy about the result. Regarding the African Nova Scotian community, in one instance I received a letter this morning from Mr. Darrell Samson. A decision was made to draw the boundary in a way that actually separates the largest family centre from a community that very much wants to be in the same riding. It's a beautiful community. It would be an honour to represent them, but they don't want to be in my riding. A decision that impacts them negatively was made without their input. I think we should reject the proposal on that basis.

Madam Chair, I'm four seconds over, so I'll cut my comments there.

● (1155)

The Chair: There might be a time difference, but I still have four seconds on this side for you.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll use it to say thank you.

The Chair: Next we have Ms. Diab.

[Translation]

Ms. Diab, you have five minutes.

[English]

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Happy New Year, everyone. *Kwe, marhaba*, hello.

I apologize, but my five minutes of opening remarks will be in English.

[English]

First, I want to thank the commissioners for their service.

I'm here today to note objections to the final report of the electoral boundaries commission for Nova Scotia.

I've received letters and emails from residents who are concerned about the commission's proposed boundaries. These letters have come from an MLA, city councillors, the chamber of commerce, seniors' associations and many other organizations. I have all the names in front of me. I've tried to send in some of these and others for translation purposes. They keep sending them to me.

Today I'm here to voice those concerns, because at this point in the process it's only members of Parliament who can object to the boundaries. These boundaries matter to people, and they deserve to have their concerns heard. I have submitted a full briefing note to the committee, including some examples of the letters I've received and maps contextualizing data from the 2021 census. Today I will go over my objections in brief.

I have two substantive complaints and one that is procedural.

First, Halifax West is a diverse community of interest. The Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act, in subparagraph 15(1)(b)(i), directs the commission to consider a "community of interest or community of identity in or the historical pattern of an electoral district" when drawing electoral boundaries.

Halifax West has a well-established community of new immigrants and minority racial, cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. It has been an exceptionally diverse riding in Nova Scotia for decades. Put succinctly, the HRM, the Halifax Regional Municipality, is a pocket of diversity in Nova Scotia, and Halifax West is a pocket of greater diversity within that. This merits protection and meaningful representation.

The proposed federal electoral boundaries divide the community by removing a particularly diverse area that I refer to as the Larry Uteck area in the riding of Halifax West. As you all know, recent immigrants to Canada and minority groups have unique needs from the federal government, so it's essential that this Larry Uteck area remain in Halifax West.

Second is the objection received from the community of St. Margarets Bay. The boundary that separates Halifax West from the rid-

ing of South Shore—St. Margarets was significantly altered in the commission's final report. This boundary divided the community of St. Margarets Bay, which is a distinct historical, cultural and societal community and should not be divided. It has existed as one community since it was settled in 1780. I'm now reading verbatim some of what the residents sent me. Residents are concerned that the boundary "does not respect historical patterns of previous electoral boundaries".

In all of the previous federal riding boundary changes, St. Margarets Bay, from Hubbards to Peggy's Cove, has never been split. Furthermore, the residents are concerned about the fact that their community was divided in two when this move was not required due to population growth. The residents I've heard from have asked that St. Margarets Bay remain united in the South Shore—St. Margarets riding, a riding that is named in part after the community.

Procedurally, there was no in-person hearing in Halifax West to directly ask residents how their boundaries should change, although it was this riding's growth that precipitated changes to neighbouring electoral boundaries. I attended the one virtual hearing the commission held in the province of Nova Scotia and advised the commission that they should keep historical communities of interest united in the federal ridings.

I didn't hear anyone suggest or advocate for the boundaries that the commission proposed for Halifax West. The changes I'm objecting to occurred in the commission's final report and were not present in the commission's initial proposal, so we're simply asking them to revert back to what they had suggested. These surprise changes have violated the principle of procedural fairness for these residents, and they've asked me to use my position as the member of Parliament to make sure their voices are being heard in this process.

To conclude, in my five minutes I have aimed to give an overview of my objections to the commission's final report. More detail can be found in the documents that were submitted and translated in both languages.

Preserving the St. Margarets Bay community and the Larry Uteck community would affect neighbouring ridings but would keep them all within the population variance that is described in the legislation.

Again, thank you very much to the federal electoral boundaries commission for Nova Scotia for all their concerns.

Thank you to the committee that's here. I'm happy to answer questions.

• (1200)

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so much for those comments.

Monsieur Battiste, it's up to five minutes for you.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, colleagues.

I'm going to jump right into my objections.

First, I wanted to read a quote from the Elections Canada website something that was tabled 20 years ago. It says, "Aboriginal people can make a strong claim that the federal electoral system perpetuates their exclusion." It's a bold statement, but I plan to show why that statement is still true today after 20 years. There are improvements that we need. I'm seeking your help to remedy this today.

I have five grounds for my objections. Firstly, there was a lack of procedural fairness for the affected communities. The Mi'kmaq community ties of Eskasoni, Wagmatcook, Membertou and Sydney were not considered. It was done without any consultation from impacted Mi'kmaq communities. The commission did not take into consideration indigenous languages in the same way as other historical minority language communities. Finally, the work is not aligned with the practice of other electoral commissions.

I'm going to get into the procedural fairness part. I really only have the opportunity to talk about three of the reasons why this is procedurally unfair.

Usually, if you're going to make big changes, you do so at the beginning of the process. You say, "This is what we're proposing", which gives people a chance to have their feedback listened to and gives people a sense of where you're going. The first recommendation in the proposal for Sydney—Victoria had zero changes. There were no changes. Based on consultation with a handful of people, who asked that they make an urban versus rural riding in Cape Breton, this was accepted. It's very strange that they would do so in the second report, without giving the affected communities any chance to know this was coming. I call it procedural catfishing, if anyone understands the "catfishing" phrase.

One of the biggest things I'm looking at is, when you heard the testimony of people saying that we should make an urban area for the municipality, the only place that was suggested to be removed from that riding was the largest Mi'kmaq community of 5,000 voters. It's the community that is my home. I believe that the moment the commission heard that the only region they were being asked to remove from the municipal riding was a Mi'kmaq community, that point triggered a duty to consult.

Article 19 in the schedule of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, which we just passed, requires that, when administrative boards make a decision that impacts indigenous communities, the free, prior and informed consent of that Mi'kmaq community is needed. I could go into the laws around consultation, but I don't have the time on this.

What we're seeing here is a decision that the Mi'kmaq community had zero opportunity to weigh in on. I have a letter here from all five Cape Breton chiefs who object to this. If you're looking at No-

va Scotia, 66% of the on-reserve population is in the riding of Cape Breton. Besides the idea that there was no consultation, Eskasoni has a deep connection to the Sydney area.

I want to go into what other electoral commissions have looked at. If you look at commissions in British Columbia in the most recent provincial election, they said that they want to follow the principles of UNDRIP as part of their mandate. In Nova Scotia, the provincial boundaries looked not only at Acadian and Mi'kmaq communities, but also at African Nova Scotia communities.

I think the biggest and best evidence of this was in most recent report of the Ontario far north electoral riding commission. It said, "Indigenous representation must be given more weight in light of...past injustices". There's only been a handful of first nations MPs in the history of this country who live on a reserve. There aren't a lot of indigenous MPs in this country. We're seeing why. It's because of these electoral processes.

I'm here to say that the commission's report is inconsistent with the law and the practice of commissions across this country, and that these changes weren't justified, as my colleague Mr. Fraser has already stated. We have an opportunity today to end that. We have an opportunity today, in this committee, to end the historical belief that these electoral boundary systems and these systems have perpetuated indigenous exclusion.

When indigenous communities look at this, the overwhelming question that I get asked is, "How could they do this?" In the era of UNDRIP and reconciliation, how can a commission, without any consultation or hearing from that indigenous community, remove the only Mi'kmaq-speaking member of Parliament—the only Mi'kmaq member of Parliament ever in the history of Canada to be elected—from his home community?

• (1205)

My timer says I'm up. I'm asking that you guys make the commission look at this, and I'm asking for the precedent to be set today that an indigenous member of Parliament and indigenous communities have the right to be consulted when an administrative board like electoral boundaries makes a decision that adversely affects them.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

It's good that the time zones have realigned. That's perfect.

We're going to start with six-minute rounds, starting with Mr. Perkins.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for your presentations and for bringing these matters to the committee.

As Minister Fraser noted, as a fellow Nova Scotian, I share—we all share—the desire to make sure we have “effective representation”, to use the Supreme Court term, for all Nova Scotians.

As a fellow Nova Scotian MP, I have no doubt that you were all aware of the process the commission undertook for public consultation and, like in other provinces, residents had the opportunity to share their views with the commission in written format and/or to speak at the in-person hearings or go to a virtual hearing.

All residents of Nova Scotia had ample time to share their views with the boundary commission during the consultation process in the spring, which ran for several months. The commission vigorously advertised their locations and the times and dates of the nine in-person public hearings and one virtual meeting.

I know that I—and I'm sure you, as responsible MPs—also promoted the date, time and location of the one hearing that was held in my riding in Bridgewater, which, by the way, is an hour and a half from each end of my riding, yet I had 25 people in my riding show up for it because of the profile we gave it. That's a much further distance than all three of you had for this hearing. In fact, in my case, for Shelburne County, radically, it was being suggested that it be moved to another riding, yet those residents, an hour and a half away, came to the meeting.

There were over 1,000 written submissions that were given by Nova Scotians to the commission, in addition to the public hearings. On the claims that your constituents were not aware, I find that inconsistent with what the commission actually did and what was the process that they followed in all 10 hearings. I'll try to make a statement here to go through all of this. There's a lot you've brought forward.

In fact, of note is that the one held in Antigonish was roughly 40 minutes from the population centre of Pictou County, and the one in Truro was roughly 40 minutes from Pictou County. My constituents had way more distance to travel than yours did, Mr. Fraser.

Ms. Diab, the one in Sackville was only 15 minutes from your riding, and a little further from the riding of Halifax and the others, yet there were lots of representatives of those communities at those ridings.

Mr. Battiste, Eskasoni is only a half-hour from Sydney, and Membertou is only four minutes from where the hearing was held. Therefore, Mr. Battiste and Ms. Diab, you didn't go to the public hearings to hear anything, and, Mr. Battiste, you didn't attend the virtual hearing. Ms. Diab did. I don't believe either of you even wrote a speech.

My colleague Dr. Ellis, from Cumberland—Colchester, who saw absolutely no change, like you proposed, Mr. Battiste, took the time and effort to appear before the commission.

Now you're asking us, as parliamentarians, to interfere with the neutral process of a commission chosen and vetted by the Speaker. It seems very strange to me that you would want to rewrite this open process. The commission laid out its challenge for the public in the first report and in the second report. The massive population increase in the Halifax Regional Municipality was their primary concern—and, Ms. Diab, your riding receiving the highest one, way above the 25% limit—and the continual erosion over decades of the population in Cape Breton and trying to balance those two issues.

In my view, the commission restored the historical wrong done to all these ridings in the 1996 and 2003 redistributions, and you're now petitioning again. From Confederation until the 1996 and 2003 redistributions, in my riding, St. Margarets Bay, the bay was always split in two on the Lunenburg county line, right through the middle of the bay, separating the eastern part of the bay from the western part of the bay. It was that way from Confederation until only 20 years ago, so you're incorrect. Also, they have very different histories, with Huguenots on one side and foreign Protestants on the other. I actually live on that bay.

Before the 2001 redistribution, Mr. Fraser, Antigonish County, as part of the municipal area known as the “strait area”, was historically part of Cape Breton ridings. In fact, from 1969 to 1997, Antigonish was part of Cape Breton Highlands—Canso, meaning that Antigonish was part of the strait region. This seat was held by Allan MacEachen, former deputy prime minister, with that community in it, and he was able to represent it very well. I think you would agree with that. As well, there was Al Graham, former Liberal senator, now deceased. The reuniting of old industrial Cape Breton also corrects an historical wrong where, for many decades, we had one population in that riding, an urban riding and a rural riding. The urban community interest of the new Sydney—Victoria balances the rural community interest of the other new riding.

● (1210)

In terms of the indigenous population, Sydney—Victoria has 10% indigenous population, and Cape Breton—Canso has 7.4%. In the new riding, it's essentially flipped so the new Sydney—Victoria has 6.7% and the new Cape Breton—Canso riding has 10%. If you were able to represent it well before, I don't see the difference. The relationship and the percentages of the populations in those two ridings are basically the same.

At the public hearing, a former NDP MP supported the change in Sydney—Victoria, as did the former Liberal mayor of the area of Cape Breton.

I think there's a challenge here in claiming that the commission did not hold hearings, that they were not public and that people didn't know. I believe that's a false claim.

The Chair: I'm going to cut your time at 6:07. You've received your full time.

For all MPs who, I'm sure, are glued to their TVs, I just want to make sure, Mr. Perkins, that the whole concept and the conversation, which you shared, are part of the process. It's in the act. Public consultations take place, and a report is filed with the House of Commons. That report is then sent to committee. We have 30 days for MPs to look at that report and then we have 30 days for objections. I was concerned when it came to objections, but it turns out that objections can be for or against. They don't all have to be against.

We are entirely following the process. PROC did not ask to do this work, but within the act we have to do this work. We take our work very seriously here.

For MPs who have taken the time to follow the processes, you get five minutes. If you choose a substitute from among your committee members, you don't have to get 10 signatures, and you don't have to follow the process. You get six minutes if you get the first round. That's what I've just learned.

You will not get time to respond to that, which I regret, because usually we have a really good exchange at this committee. Hopefully you will have an opportunity to do that. I will try to provide you some time to ensure that you can counter some of the conversation, because this is a discussion. On this committee we have an obligation to report back to the House with what has been provided to us, and I take that very seriously, as I'm confident all members here do.

With that, Mr. Fergus, you have up to six minutes.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the comments of my House of Commons colleagues, and I would like to thank them for their presentations.

This morning, we have had some great presentations from Mr. Williamson and my other three colleagues.

• (1215)

[*English*]

For folks who are watching us at home, all members of Parliament were provided guidance in terms of what types of questions we should be asking.

These are all very important questions, and I think that many of them have been answered by your presentations this morning. In terms of what your rationale was and whether your objection has community support, all three of you have spoken to those things. As to what the demographic consequences of what you're propos-

ing are, these are all issues that you have very cogently laid out in your presentations.

I was particularly taken with Mr. Battiste's use of the term “cat-fishing”. I did not know what that meant so I had to go look it up. When I took a look at that, I saw that it is a process of luring somebody into a relationship using a fictional persona. In other words, what you were saying—and what all three of you were saying—is that there was an initial proposal by the Nova Scotia commission, which was pretty much acceptable to a large number of your populations, and as a result, no one was particularly bothered by it. Then, after those consultations, they introduced something very different from what was originally proposed, which, of course, then set people's hair on fire and they didn't have an opportunity to come back and let the commission know because that public consultation process was over.

Mr. Fraser, where are the representatives from the cities? Where are the representatives from the indigenous and the historical Black communities in Nova Scotia? How do they feel about the changes in your riding?

Mr. Battiste, what effect does splitting up indigenous communities—historical Mi'kmaq communities—have in terms of their representation in the House of Commons?

Ms. Diab, about the notion of procedural fairness, how does that affect the demographics within your riding and within your larger communities?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Madam Chair, how much time do we have?

The Chair: You have a minute each.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Okay.

There are 10 municipalities in my riding today. One of them is the Halifax Regional Municipality, which has a very small share of the population in a big geography. All other nine municipalities have registered their objections, both with the process and with the outcome.

The Town of Westville, to address Mr. Perkins' comments, described the process as “fatally flawed” and said that it did not give a proper opportunity for their input. In fact, the room booked was too small to accommodate the people who showed up. There was a signal sent to folks who did not submit anything in writing that they initially wouldn't be given the opportunity to speak. Municipal representatives have indicated to me that they didn't have the opportunity and, had they shown up, they didn't think they were going to be let into the room. It was not about how far away they had drive.

The message at home is, if you think Arisaig and Ingonish belong in the same riding, you're crazy, particularly when that breakdown was not put to people initially at the time of the commission. There was no consultation held in the new proposed Pictou—Eastern Shore—Preston riding, which is inappropriately named, in any event, and people did not feel they had input. It was not because it was too far to drive, but because of the rules that were laid out, signalling to them that they would be excluded.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: In my case, in Halifax West, again, what was initially proposed is totally different from what the outcome is. What was initially proposed, people were ready to live with.

I want to agree with my colleague. When you propose big changes like this, do it at the beginning so that people realize and are able to make submissions. There wasn't one in-person submission in Halifax or Halifax West, which, population-wise, is the largest riding.

Particularly to Mr. Perkins and St. Margarets Bay, I was shocked by how many people have contacted me. I've heard from the Head of St. Margaret's Bay/Boutillier's Point Recreation Association, the Bay Community Centre, the HRM district 13 councillor, the Seniors Association of St. Margaret's Bay board president, the St. Margaret's Bay Chamber of Commerce president, the Twin Bays Coalition, the Healthy Bays Network chair, the community enterprise centre's president, the community enterprise centre's volunteers and the St. Margarets Bay tourism association. I've had two letters. I've heard from Gary Burchell, lobster fisherman and boat tour operator; Rob Futter, resident of Glen Margaret; Yvon and Wendy Madore; the Indian Point Young Naturalist Club; the St. Margaret's Bay Stewardship Association; residents of Glen Haven; the St. Margaret's Bay Housing Coalition—several people there—and Bluenose Engineering. I can go on.

Some of them told me in the email—I don't know these people and I don't know the groups, because I don't represent that area—that they've copied Mr. Perkins, so he knows.

This is all coming down now. They told me they've taken an ad and put it in...I don't know what local paper you have, because I'm not in that community. They're letting their community know, because they are scared to death.

According to the letters I received, they want to be in that community. They call themselves South Shore—St. Margarets, and the St. Margarets people want to stay in South Shore—St. Margarets.

• (1220)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: In answering Mr. Fergus's question, yes, the zero changes initially to the riding, I think, was the reason why they had such poor turnouts in the Sydney area, with just a handful of people showing up. What if that handful of people showing up are allowed to come to a presentation and say that we should keep all of the Cape Breton Regional Municipality the same, but exclude the largest Mi'kmaq community of Eskasoni?

I feel that creates the suspicion that the commission should have said, "Okay, let's hear what Eskasoni feels about it", because Eskasoni has deep ties economically to Sydney, Membertou and the areas of Wagmatcook that are being taken out of this. That is why they all feel like this process is very suspicious.

If you ask indigenous communities if they knew this was even possible, they didn't. Because I'm the first Mi'kmaq ever to be elected, these processes under that would have....

I'm sorry. That's my alarm.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: When I get another turn, I want to talk about the immigrant population.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: It's just so—

The Chair: No. That's the beauty of sometimes being interrupted.

I was going to let you finish your thought, but with that, we're going to go to six minutes with Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's true that we could talk about this for a long time.

First of all, I would like to tell you that, last summer, I had the pleasure of visiting you as part of my work, and I loved that. That was, of course, before *Fiona*. I've been thinking a lot about the people in your community. So I dare to talk about your ridings. That was a little aside.

I would like to focus on one aspect of your initial remarks, namely the service provided to our fellow citizens. I mention this because I think that, in Quebec as elsewhere, this will be a challenge linked to population movements.

If we care about the service that a member of the House of Commons provides to their constituents and their community, what should our commissioners consider in terms of outcomes?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for your question.

If I may, I'll answer you in English.

[*English*]

The criteria are laid out in the legislation. Population equity is one of the criteria. The legislation permits a 25% variance. It seems that the commission made a decision to pursue a smaller rate of variance. You can exceed 25% in extraordinary circumstances. I would suggest Mr. Battiste's submissions indicate extraordinary circumstances to include indigenous peoples in the process.

The change to my constituency is from a variance of 16 point something per cent to 13 point something per cent, not a meaningful change. Where they failed, in my view, is on those other issues: serviceability of ridings and communities of interest. What I'm very concerned about is that there's very little commonality between the rural issues in the small towns and rural communities that I represent today—around the fishery, around agriculture, around the mining sector and around small town needs—and those of suburban Halifax. They are beautiful communities, but they have very different economies and different needs.

By engaging people in the process to understand what the needs of communities are and to ensure that a member of Parliament's time will be deployed in a way that will effectively serve their interests, I think we could have come up with a much better and more successful map that accommodated feedback from first nations communities, from African Nova Scotian communities and from the plethora of municipalities that are outraged at the proposal.

I have taken up too much of my time, so I'll now share it with Mr. Battiste.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: When we look at this and we look at Indian reserves, those are under federal jurisdiction. They get all of their services from the federal government—from housing to social development to education, all of those. We've seen provincial boundaries that have taken into consideration francophone communities, Black communities, ethnic communities and indigenous communities. Only one of those has a constitutional status that directly links it with the federal government. Provinces are taking into consideration language rights, and they are talking about effective representation. The federal government had a responsibility to look at indigenous communities and indigenous representation based on the constitutional status of indigenous people.

They said they were going to have an open process and that anyone could come. It was proven that the duty to consult had not been met under the Mikisew Cree case in the west. They had an open forum on Parks Canada, but the communities needed their own distinct consultation. That's why Mikisew Cree failed.

The legal case is already there for our saying that this is a duty for which we are responsible. I feel that this committee is responsible for overseeing this commission and saying that they didn't turn their minds to indigenous issues, and in the era of reconciliation and UNDRIP, that's wrong.

• (1225)

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: For Halifax West, I talked about St. Margarets Bay, but let me talk about the newcomer immigrant population. Halifax West is the most ethnically and linguistically diverse riding of the province and has been for decades. They are decimating that or desecrating that. I don't know the English word.

The law allows plus or minus 25%. In fact, currently Halifax West has over 25%, but what they are doing now is bringing me even lower. Even doing what we're proposing is still well within any numbers, if you want the numbers. Even the communities themselves—newcomers and cultural communities—have no idea. They would have no idea that they are supposed to go out and make representations. A lot of the stuff didn't affect them anyway.

I think all three of us are on the same page here. I'm sure they did their best, but that's kind of what we got. We're asking for them to go back and look at that based on what we now know is their final product, which was not envisioned in their original submission. It's all a learning curve for everybody. I'm sure that, as a result of that, 10 years from now it will be a bit different. I don't think most of us realize that you should object or file things if you agree. Certainly most people would not. Indigenous people would not. Minorities would not.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: In conclusion, I understand that, given the demographic modulation and according to the criteria to be prioritized, the desire was to prevent the movement of the population, but never at the expense of the communities of interest.

That's what I see. You'll see it soon; it's the same thing in Quebec.

So I hear you, I'm listening, and I thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

This is really good. I think it's nice when people do the work and come here well informed and engaged. There's no shortage of time that we need to fill up. I think we make our points, and then we can have more rounds of questioning, because I know that more people want to jump into this exciting conversation.

Ms. Blaney, you have up to six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

My first question, through you, is for MP Diab.

I'm trying to understand the solution you're proposing. Perhaps you could clarify. Is it to extend the boundary of South Shore—St. Margarets into the city of Halifax or somewhere else?

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: In relation to that side of the boundary, the residents want to leave it as it now exists. They want the status quo. I've listed for you the over 19 submissions I've received so far. Right now the status quo is well within the population numbers, but they're also saying that their community of interest is best represented with their namesake of St. Margarets Bay, and that's South Shore—St. Margarets.

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

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: It's still within the population size of plus or minus 25%. In fact, it's even much less than that.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you for that. That was great.

Mr. Perkins, you have up to five minutes.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I'll start by saying that I'm still surprised at your surprise at the fact that there would be change out of a consultation, that when more than a thousand Nova Scotians wrote, and many more participated in the live hearings, it wouldn't result in a change. Of course it would. That's the purpose of consultation.

If you attended the in-person meetings, you would have heard the commissioner say that this was the beginning of the process, the starting point, that they were looking forward to community input and would change based on what they heard in the community input. That's exactly what they did.

Ms. Diab, there are lots of quotes from those public hearings and from two former city councillors as well who went and said that this part should not be in South Shore. The historical boundary, just so you know, is between Halifax County and Lunenburg County. That line goes right through the centre of St. Margarets Bay. That has existed as a county line for about 300 years. That's the line that was changed in the 1997 to 2003 redistribution, after being in since Confederation, because they are historically different but they are also municipally different.

There are a lot of quotes I could go through from those hearings. I have them here. I know that you weren't at the hearings, so you wouldn't have heard them. I know that you've received a few letters.

With regard to the issue raised about the plus or minus 25%, there is flexibility. In the initial proposal, all of the ridings were below a 10% variance, which came out when the consultation was on. The variance in the new proposal has widened in response to that public consultation, from almost 18% under in Sydney—Victoria to now only 10% over in Halifax West. The numbers, as you can see in the report, are all very different. That was the response to that.

With regard to Larry Uteck, the challenge there, as you know and we all know, is that it's the fastest-growing part of the province. That was the primary issue for the commission to face. It was the growth of that area through Bedford and how it causes a domino effect with the boundaries in the rest of the province.

First, I'm wondering if you could comment on the issue that consultation with over a thousand Nova Scotians apparently wasn't enough consultation, and that this consultation shouldn't have resulted in some sort of change. I don't know why not, when everybody at those hearings in Sydney said there should be a change. I think it's a great thing that they had so many people turn out. At the one in your riding, they didn't have room.

The commissioner also said that all written submissions have equal weight to the ones in person. All of your communities, and all of you as members of Parliament, had the opportunity to do that. Some of you chose not to do that.

Could you comment?

• (1230)

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Let me start out by answering that, first, on the one thousand submissions, we're not privy to those. We have no idea who they came from, what they said and what they didn't say. As you know, none of this was made public. That's one.

Two, St. Margarets Bay, the area that you represent, and I'm here to voice their concern, is the most beautiful place in Nova Scotia, as far as I'm concerned. They all are, but my God, it has Peggy's Cove. It has so many beautiful places. Who would not love to represent that area? The reason I am here, though, is that I was really surprised by the people who contacted me during Christmas and New Year's, in December and January, when they found out this was happening. They were literally...and I don't know these people. They were saying, "You are our only hope. Do something." That's why I'm here. I'm here to voice their concerns.

On the immigrant population, yes, they don't know that they can do this or not do this. When you're happy with what you're seeing, you're not going to pose any.... Even me right now, I don't.... I am here to voice those concerns and I've provided what I have.

Go ahead.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Madam Chair, one of the challenges I have with the member's argument is that the commission's report and the instance of my consultation, which was held in Antigonish, actually indicates that they heard feedback that residents did not appreciate their proposal, but they had a hard time making it work with the population, so they chose to do something different. They've acknowledged that they've heard something different from what they're recommending.

One of the challenges I have is that in the proposal, which they adjusted pursuant to the consultation that they've acknowledged did not represent their decision, they've significantly exacerbated the problem and have now put out something fundamentally different—and worse—for residents of Antigonish.

Previously, Antigonish was connected to a part of Cape Breton. Now it's connected to almost the entirety of the island, despite the fact that in the report they indicate that local residents objected to the initial proposal, and subsequently they've made it worse.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull, you have up to five minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Madam Chair.

Thanks to the MPs for being here today.

It sounds to me like there's.... I guess I want to say that I understand the comments that were made about the fact that people don't always engage in a process when they don't have an objection. I think that's especially so if you've been historically marginalized and disenfranchised.

I also want to say that I really understood from the testimony you've given that, across each one of your stories here, there seems to be the sense that the first phase, the first proposal that was given, seemed to kind of lure people into a sense of security around what was being proposed. Then something else resulted in the second phase after the consultations took place, and now there's really only this process to voice those concerns.

On Mr. Perkins' point, which I found very offensive, to be honest.... To say that they're now proposing to "interfere", to use that word I think is just inappropriate, because this is the actual process that we're following, as the chair has said. I think you should feel perfectly confident and comfortable in expressing your concerns here at this committee, and I invite you to do so.

Based on your perspective, Mr. Battiste, is there a systemic bias in this process?

• (1235)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I would say yes, and I would say that all of the literature on Elections Canada's site would say yes. They talk about the historical displacement. They talk about the lack of trust in federal institutions, and we can see why.

The reason Eskasoni is the largest Mi'kmaq community is that we took Mi'kmaq communities from all across Nova Scotia, displaced them from their homes, centralized them into a reserve and hoped that they would die off. They didn't die off. They grew. Now they're the largest Mi'kmaq community.

Then, when you hear a presentation at a consultation that says, "You know, this community maybe has a little too much of a voice in the institution and we should remove them", it creates suspicion.

Also, the fact that there is a process, as Mr. Perkins talked about, does not change the constitutional nature of the law. It does not change what UNDRIP states:

States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous people concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting or implementing [any] legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.

Now, I think there's a reason why they put in "administrative measures". It's because a lot of times the displacement of indigenous communities has not been done by legislation. It's been done by administrative boards. This is what we're seeing in this situation.

I'm asking that this committee look at that and say, never again should an indigenous community be displaced without their consent and without their consultation.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: If I'm interpreting you correctly—and I think I am—that duty to consult must be more proactive and means a lot more than what you've seen in this process. Can you describe what that really means? How would the process look different, in your eyes, if it were to be actually procedurally fair?

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I think Ontario got it right when they said that they have to look at historical injustices and give more weight to indigenous representation based on the history of this country. I think that if the commission would have gone in with a mandate or even turned their minds at all to indigenous communities.... They're not mentioned once in this commission report. The fact that indigenous communities, Indian reserves, get all of their services from the federal government, not the provincial governments, shows that there is an increased number of reasons why these federal commissions should take this into consideration, and they just didn't.

The fact that this may result in litigation because of that is something that I think this committee has the opportunity to remedy today, before it goes into that situation.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: In terms of the act—because there's an act that governs this particular process, which is the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act—should that be amended, as well, coming out of this process, in your view, based on UNDRIP?

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I think that once UNDRIP passed, it was part of the law immediately. Once we passed Bill C-15, there was an article in there that should have been respected. The fact that it's a new law doesn't change the fact that it is law, and the commissioner should have known that there was a part of this that needed to have indigenous participation.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You have the floor, Ms. Gaudreau.

• (1240)

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to use my two and a half minutes to give my colleagues an opportunity to speak.

Since the commissioners are watching, in a few words, what are your biggest concerns? What message do you want to send to the commissioners?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I thank them for their work, and I think they were trying to do something important with rebalancing the population. Where I think they missed the mark was that they separated communities that share common bonds. That's going to lead to worse outcomes for people who live in those communities.

Frankly, it makes no sense for me to show up here as a small town and rural guy to say that I should not have suburban Halifax, which tends to support our party. I'm asking to maintain like economies between rural communities and small towns. If we have representatives who can bring a focus to their work to support the needs of their community members that share those common bonds, I believe Canadians will be better off.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I'll say that I thank them for their work, but I'm excited that they, and we, have the opportunity to send a clear message. That message is that the systemic racism and failures in the past to ensure indigenous representation stop today. It stops with this commission. It stops with this precedent that says never again will indigenous people feel like they're an afterthought. Never again will indigenous people feel that they're purposefully being removed, because we make a decision today, at the start of this process with Nova Scotia, that says indigenous representation is important.

If there is a decision that impacts an indigenous community, they have the right to be heard. "Nothing about us without us" is the premise that indigenous communities have stated over and over again. They have an opportunity to right this wrong. I hope they turn their minds to doing that.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: I would agree with all of that, and I thank the commission, because their job is very difficult. I would say Nova Scotia has turned the corner. You cannot disenfranchise the diverse communities that Nova Scotia now represents in terms of culture, in terms of languages and in terms of all of that stuff.

This area that I represent right now is the hub of many of them. That needs to be taken into consideration because newcomers also need to be included.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: It was a good use of your time. Well done!

[*English*]

Ms. Blaney, it's over to you.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

Mr. Battiste, you talked a lot about righting this wrong. In terms of system change, what would you recommend to the commissioner around engaging indigenous voices in a new way?

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I would say any testimony that they hear that talks about an indigenous community without them in the room requires them to consult with that community. At the point when the commission heard that they should remove an indigenous community or that they should split Mi'kmaq communities, they had the duty to consult.

My recommendation for this committee to recommend to the commission is that we set a precedent that says any indigenous community that's adversely impacted by a decision around electoral boundaries deserves consultation and deserves to be heard.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's all for my questions.

The Chair: We will continue with five minutes for you, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to my colleagues for appearing.

Madam Diab, you've made an argument about procedural fairness. I would just note that to go from Larry Uteck to Lower Sackville, it takes 14 minutes. Larry Uteck to Cole Harbour, where another hearing was held, is 31 minutes. From Hubbards to Lower

Sackville around St. Margarets Bay is 43 minutes. Hubbards to Cole Harbour is 56 minutes. Peggy's Cove to Lower Sackville is 51 minutes. Peggy's Cove to Cole Harbour is 59 minutes. In other words, residents from those areas could get to a hearing in less than an hour. In some instances it would take a half-hour or even 14 minutes, plus of course any virtual hearing.

I would submit respectfully that, on that basis, your procedural fairness argument is rather weak.

Mr. Fraser, you talked a little bit about communities of interest and the connection between Antigonish and Pictou County. I think you raised some valid points in that regard, but at the same time, no federal riding is going to be perfect, or it's often difficult to draw a perfect riding. Sometimes lines have to be drawn at a certain place, and the commission acknowledged that they had heard conflicting input. Some residents supported extending Antigonish into the lower strait area, which encompasses four counties, while others did not. Some of the commonalities, as I understand it—and I would be interested in your input—between Antigonish and the Cape Breton component of the riding include a common chamber of commerce, a health authority that had been in place until recently, a regional hospital, the same public school administration, a community of faith with the head of Catholic diocese in Antigonish as well as a radio station XFM 989 CJFX.

I would just welcome your comments based on my—

● (1245)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Cooper, you raise an important point. Local knowledge of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton is really important to understanding the point you are articulating. The commission acknowledged that the preponderance of submissions during the consultation were opposed to the attachment of Antigonish to Cape Breton.

In fact I agree with you—there's no perfect riding. It's not perfect now. Antigonish community residents actually want the entirety of Antigonish County to come back into the mainland of Nova Scotia.

The challenge I have with the conflicting evidence you've pointed to is that the commission asserted that they had heard some submissions indicating commonalities between Antigonish and the strait region and Cape Breton. They're not proposing to annex Antigonish only to the strait region. They're proposing to annex Antigonish to the entirety of Cape Breton Island except for Sydney and Glace Bay—if you don't know the map, that's sort of the upper right-hand corner if you can picture it on a map—despite some commonalities that are actually very real. If there was a proposal to attach Pictou County, Antigonish and Port Hawkesbury, I could see a reasonable person saying that maybe that would make sense. Nobody is talking about that, and the population presumably wouldn't think it would work. Otherwise, they might have come up with that kind of a solution.

What they're proposing now is to attach Antigonish not just to the strait region but to all of Cape Breton, except Sydney and Glace Bay, including communities that do not have those commonalities.

Mr. Michael Cooper: How much time...?

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: You're talking about minutes, but you asked the question.

Emotionally—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Well, it is my time. I have a minute.

Okay. Go ahead for 20 seconds.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: There were a thousand submissions, and Nova Scotia now has well over a million people, I would say. People who did not know this was happening or who were happy—I mean, even Mr. Perkins didn't file an objection here. Presumably he was okay with the redrawn boundary.

I would say to you particularly—and I'm an immigrant—that for newcomers, people who don't speak the language and so on, it's not about the minutes or how long it goes on. It's the fact that they need to know that they should be engaged and that this is happening and all of that. There's so much to do within just the minutes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Madam Diab. I have respect for you and I certainly wasn't intending to be anything other than.... Again, I respectfully find your argument on the procedural fairness question a little bit wanting, but that's just my opinion.

Mr. Fraser, what you're asking for is essentially the re-establishment of your current riding. If, for example, Antigonish were put back in Central Nova or whatever name the commission has—Pictou or Eastern Shore—what impact would that have on metro Halifax, which is the fastest-growing region, obviously by far, in Nova Scotia?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It depends on what consequential decision the commission would take on the other side of the riding.

If you added Antigonish back into Central Nova and did not change the proposal near Halifax, it would still be below the average population. If you maintain the existing boundary, rather than extend it to Halifax, it would be below the average to a greater degree. If the commission said they'd put Antigonish back in and extend it all the way to the city, there would still be some challenges.

However, either leaving the boundary as it was on the Halifax side of the riding or extending it as they proposed would still keep

them just slightly below the average population across Nova Scotia. I'd have to check the math to be exactly sure, because I don't know the precise population of each community. Either way, though, it would not create challenges from a population point of view, if that's what your question was.

Thank you, Michael.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull, I believe I'm coming to you.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Madam Chair.

It sounds to me like the notion of consultation is in question here. It sounds like there seems to be an issue with the process. Everyone's taking issue with the process.

Having been someone who specialized in consultation processes, it always occurred to me that the design of those processes is important and that the communication strategy around them is really important. Just because you advertise something on the radio, or host a public hearing of some kind and put a notice up, it doesn't mean that people are necessarily going to be included. I think that's something I'm hearing across all of the comments you're making. That's a remark more than anything.

Mr. Battiste, I want to ask you this, specifically. Were any of the indigenous communities you spoke of today specifically reached out to and invited to participate in the consultation process?

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Not at all. This came as a complete shock to them.

If they were given the opportunity and told specifically, I would ask what accommodations were made for them. I come from a Mi'kmaq community that speaks, largely, the Mi'kmaq language.

For them to come to a commission of people who don't speak their language and to try to find transportation there.... This is assuming that they have a car and that they have access to that transportation, which, normally, indigenous communities don't have. What would be the odds of their going into an area filled with non-Mi'kmaq people, where they would be expected to address electoral boundaries in the English language by themselves and in a process they aren't familiar with? I just don't believe that would have happened.

There's a reason why there's systemic racism embedded within the system. It's because they're not meant to accommodate indigenous peoples. Many provinces have seen that as an obstacle and have been proactive in doing something about it. This commission did not and was not.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Mr. Fraser, do you want to add to that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure.

One of the things you have to appreciate about rural Nova Scotia in the last couple of years, as well, is that our daily newspapers have become weeklies. Our radio stations, with the exception of 989 XFM—thanks for the shout-out, Michael—have become syndicated. They don't cover local content the way they used to, even three or four years ago, to get people out to events.

To put it into perspective, I just pulled up on my phone a resolution that the Town of Westville passed in objecting to the commission's proposal. They described the consultation process as “rushed and failed to allow for adequate input from the residents and elected leaders of Westville”. They described the process as “fatally flawed”.

New Glasgow, Trenton, Pictou, Westville, Pictou County, the County of Antigonish, the Town of Antigonish and the District of St. Mary's all, after the fact, have said that this is no good for them. Had they had the opportunity, been made aware and been given space, they all would have said that at the outset.

I question the ability in the short term, with some modest advertising, to hear from the voices. I think you need to deliberately engage people, particularly those who represent thousands of other people. I think it was a missed opportunity, and I think it should be revisited.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

Ms. Diab, do you also want to add to that? With that long list of organizations you read out, it seems to me that it's pretty hard for any member to suggest that consultation was done.

How could you have that many people who are now upset about the process if the consultation was fair and inclusive?

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Again, I read out that list, and that's specifically from the St. Margarets Bay side. Once they were familiar with what was happening, they started reaching out, and they reached out to each other. It wasn't me going to them. They found out, they were very concerned and they were doing that.

In terms of the newcomer and immigrant population, we have a mosque and we have churches. They're not going to come out with this unless they're specifically.... Originally, there was really no reason to go to some of these communities. Because Halifax West's population currently is over 25%, that precipitated decreasing and changing boundaries. What they came up with is that now I'm even less.... The riding of Halifax West as proposed is now even less than average—

• (1255)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Ms. Diab.

I don't want to cut you off, but I wanted to add that it seems to me that it's only when you divide a community of interest or a community of identity, which is one of the key core concepts that is embedded in the legislation as part of the boundary commission's work.... It's centred on those concepts, in addition to some others, but it seems to me that it's only when you really try to divide those natural communities that occur that you get these outcries from communities.

It's no surprise to me that there wasn't an initial outcry and a need for a lot of engagement, and that naturally it would come later if

they were proposing something that didn't make sense for the people who are in those places. I think that's what we're hearing from you, if I'm not mistaken.

I think I'm out of time. I guess I can't pose another question, but I appreciate your comments.

The Chair: That's excellent.

I really do appreciate this time that we've all had together.

I want to get on the record the six questions we shared with you. I think I did get answers to one, but I want to confirm.

Is there a domino effect to the surrounding ridings occurring from the changes you are proposing? Can I get a quick yes or no?

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: In my circumstance, it's all well within the population, as the act and the law suggest. It's all below, so....

Hon. Sean Fraser: In my instance, there is not on the Cape Breton-Antigonish side. There potentially could be, depending on what decision would be taken towards Halifax.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: No, as long as they were following the same ridings as they currently have. They would have no impact, except in Central Nova.

The Chair: Thank you.

There's a second question I wanted to confirm. Have you talked to your colleagues about these proposed changes? If so, do they agree?

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: On my side, there are two. One is Mr. Perkins, who is here, and you have heard the evidence on that part.

The second one is the member for Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook. He is completely aware of what I'm doing here today, and there's agreement.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Jaime and I are aligned, and we are talking about the same boundary from Cape Breton on that side. I've spoken with my Nova Scotia colleagues. There could be some nuances, and I think people would need to see what those final decisions are, but from a principled point of view there's not an objection to my maintaining a boundary or moving a little bit along the eastern shore of Nova Scotia.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: All eight Liberal Nova Scotia MPs have signed my objection, as well as 30 others from across the country who saw this as wrong. I have spoken to them, and they are in agreement.

The Chair: Excellent.

I want to thank you for your time. You're welcome to stay, and you're also welcome to go. We'll be wrapping up within the next minute.

Today was the first day of our going through this process. I think it's really important for us to note that this is a process that PROC is tasked with. I just want us to be mindful of the people who are coming to share comments and concerns and that we are representing. We've framed a series of questions to ensure that we stay within the scope of the work that we are doing, which is actually very important work that I know we all take seriously.

The second thing I want to note is that any documents that are provided to this committee will be put together and reported back to the House and sent to the commission—everything. We don't get to choose what we want to send or not send. Any supporting documents that you provide to us, such as the letters of reference that you're referring to, come to the committee. We report them back to the House, and all of them will be reported back to the commission.

This committee is tasked with listening and engaging, asking tough questions for the most part and sharing some comments and concerns. Then we report back to the House, and the House will be

reporting that back to the commission. This is part of a process that is part of the act, and it is an entire process that really has a lot of value and importance.

You can look at, historically, 10 years ago or 20 years ago, and what has happened, but this is a really important process and we're just beginning it today. We get to go through the rest of the provinces, which I know we're all so excited about—you can hear it in my voice—so I would just be mindful of remembering where we are getting questions and where we are getting to. I think our personal information is important as well, but we should really take time perhaps to answer some of the questions so that we can get out of these conversations what needs to be brought to the commission's attention, what your ridings need us to hear, what provinces need us to hear and so forth.

I really do want to thank us all for such a good first PROC meeting of 2023, and I look forward to many more. With that, keep well and safe, and keep amazing. Take care.

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