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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 69 of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The committee is meeting today to continue its study on the report of the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Ontario 2022.

We have with us today Vance Badawey, MP for Niagara Centre; Tony Baldinelli, MP for Niagara Falls; and Peter Fragiskatos, MP for London North Centre.

You will each have up to four minutes for an opening statement, after which we will proceed to questions from committee members.

With that, we'll start with you, Mr. Badawey. Welcome to PROC.

Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to be here. I appreciate the time you're giving all three of us.

I want to take the opportunity to ensure that the mindset we begin with is one of fairness. Niagara South provides a fair electoral map to you today for the riding's voters. Fairness and balance is what we are seeking.

This is the reason for our presentation: It's supporting the ask of the mayor, as well as the mayor's city council and the community, to keep the city of Thorold whole by adding the city hall, the regional headquarters and the Canada Games Park back into the same riding as the city's population.

Currently, the division between the ridings of Niagara Centre and the St. Catharines largely follows Glendale Avenue in the city of St. Catharines. The border has been moved as part of the realignment process undertaken by the electoral boundaries commission, largely to account for the large electoral size of my friend's riding, which is the riding of Niagara Falls. Western Hill and south St. Catharines, including Brock University, currently exist within the boundaries of my riding of Niagara Centre.

The first draft and initial proposal by the commission would have placed the urban area of Thorold within the expanded riding of Niagara West. In this initial proposal, the new boundary between Niagara West and St. Catharines would have followed the municipal boundary between the city of St. Catharines and the neighbouring community of the city of Thorold.

The latest draft proposal was updated to reflect input from the community, with Thorold—which is, by the way, the eighth fastest-growing city in Canada—continuing to belong to the new riding of Niagara South. However, a bump was introduced along the northern municipal boundary, as you can see on your map. The bump removed the Canada Games Park, which is presently on the grounds of Brock University. It also removed the Niagara region headquarters and Thorold's city hall from the Niagara South riding. These are all located within the city of Thorold.

After speaking with the mayor of Thorold, I know his preference on behalf of the community is to maintain the existing northern boundary between the city of St. Catharines and his city of Thorold to ensure that his community is whole and that it is represented with continuity by its member of Parliament. This is consistent, I might add, with all four ridings in Niagara. There is no logical reason to gerrymander the north boundary separating the city of St. Catharines and the city of Thorold. Once again, all ridings in Niagara remain within their municipal boundaries.

In conclusion, we support the mayor and the City of Thorold's request that Thorold be made whole and the ridings' dividing line be placed consistent with all four ridings within the region of Niagara where the municipal boundaries currently exist. In this case, between the city of St. Catharines and the city of Thorold, it is along St. David's Road, which becomes Sir Isaac Brock Way as it travels to the west of the roadway.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1105)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Baldinelli, welcome.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli (Niagara Falls, CPC): Good morning, colleagues. It's a pleasure to be with all of you today.

I am here for two reasons. First, I object to the name change of the Niagara Falls riding, which is contained within the electoral boundaries commission report for Ontario. The commission proposes changing the riding name from “Niagara Falls” to “Niagara North”. Second, with the support of our local mayors, I'm also here to propose that the riding now be called “Niagara Falls—Niagara-on-the-Lake”.

Regarding the commission's proposed name change to "Niagara North", I object for the following reasons.

First, the riding name Niagara North is both inaccurate and confusing. Geographically, the north area of Niagara stretches along the entire length of the shoreline of Lake Ontario. This area transcends many municipal boundaries, including municipalities and adjacent federal ridings such as St. Catharines and Niagara West. All of this area can be considered Niagara North.

Second, it seems to me that the riding name may have been proposed by the commission to conveniently counterbalance the newly renamed riding of Niagara South, which was formerly called "Niagara Centre". However, it does not accurately reflect the close connections the two communities of Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake share. Nor does it relate to, or resonate in any way with, the local population that resides in these communities.

Instead, I'm suggesting, by way of my proposal, that the riding now be called "Niagara Falls—Niagara-on-the-Lake", and I do so for the following reasons.

First, there are only two municipalities within the boundaries of this riding. This proposed name is short and descriptive to accurately reflect those two communities.

Second, both municipalities, Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake, are popular culinary and wine tourism destinations, and they share a unique historical bond in being the home to the largest number of War of 1812 battlefield sites anywhere in this country. Recognizing both of their names in the riding name honours them in this regard and highlights their significance and place in Canada.

Third, the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake has never been included in a federal riding name for the area. Adding the town's name to the riding name better represents and honours what I am proud to say is the first capital of Upper Canada in a community that has become known as the prettiest town in Canada.

Last, in terms of the order of municipality names, Niagara Falls should be sequenced before Niagara-on-the-Lake because Niagara Falls is larger in terms of population and economy and is Canada's number one leisure tourism destination.

Importantly, I wish to emphasize that this proposal for the change has the support of both municipal mayors.

I thank you for the time this morning and I'll take any questions that follow.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Baldinelli.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos, the floor is yours. Welcome to PROC.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thought it was going to be civil here, but the prettiest community, as we all know, is London, Ontario. We'll leave that aside. It's fine. You can have the town and I'll have the city.

Thank you very much, colleagues. It's very interesting to address you from this point of view, obviously.

[*Translation*]

It's my pleasure to be here.

[*English*]

I truly appreciate the work that all of you have done on this specific issue. Since time is limited, let me get straight into it.

While the commission has redistributed ridings in London, Ontario, in a way that ensures population numbers are within the desired range of 116,000 people, in the proposed London Centre it has not, in my opinion, met the requirement of abiding by an equally important principle: that every effort be made to ensure that communities of interest remain intact. The objection submitted here stems from this concern, one shared not only by me but by the city's mayor and various community members.

A few examples illustrate the point.

Neighbourhoods that have enjoyed a connection for several decades will now, should the proposed changes go through, be severed and placed into a different riding. One example is the Stoneybrook area. Residents within this geographic region use the same high schools, the same community centre, the same shopping centre and overlapping fire and ambulance services.

Equally important is the fact that approximately 37,000 Londoners will now live in a rural riding, the proposed Middlesex—London, which will be separated from the rest of London. This means their ability to raise concerns in common cause with fellow urban citizens is significantly diminished, if not done away with altogether.

As stated by Josh Morgan, London's mayor:

...my main concerns are centred around the reconfigured riding of Middlesex—London. Under this scenario, approximately 37,000 Londoners would lose a dedicated federal representative based in London. These constituents have distinct and unique urban concerns which are difficult to reconcile alongside those of predominantly rural areas....

London is indeed a city with a unique identity, concerns and challenges. All communities are. We are not talking, however, about a few hundred urban citizens moving into a rural riding, but 37,000 people. Carving off such a large portion of the city is simply inappropriate, if not irresponsible.

I do not discount for a moment the challenge facing the commission, and I do appreciate their work, yet it appears they have placed undue weight on the population quota and not enough importance on keeping intact established communities of interest, as we see in the most recent proposal for London Centre. In solving problems identified in other riding proposals, the commission has created a new and I think serious one.

The first proposal released by the commission in the summer of 2022 did not break communities of interest in the proposed London Centre. Furthermore, its population quota was within the range they set as acceptable. As such, I think it should serve as the alternative. This certainly would have an effect on neighbouring ridings; I'm not discounting that. I've also raised this objection with each area MP.

I'm happy to discuss these matters further during the allotted time for questions.

Thank you very much, colleagues, for considering the objections that I'm raising on behalf of constituents and on behalf of the city's mayor. It's a true pleasure to be at the committee today.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you. It's a true pleasure to have you here.

We will start our six-minute rounds.

Ms. Gladu, the floor is yours.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I'm going to start off with a bit of background for you. As the lead for the Ontario Conservatives on this, I attended almost every one of the public hearings, so I've heard a lot of the discussion and feel that the commissioners did really listen to people that showed up.

I'm going to start with Mr. Baldinelli, because he's looking for a name change. The commission was very open to name changes. A couple of them were objected to in the first round. "Penetanguishene" was the rename for Simcoe North, and they reverted and listened to them. Another one that was disputed was that Huron—Bruce became "South Huron Shores", and that was protested, so they were open to name changes.

Mr. Baldinelli, you want to change this riding name to "Niagara Falls—Niagara-on-the-Lake", which makes sense to me. I used to live down there, and the only two things that are now in your riding are Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake. Would you say that the other councillors and mayors that are associated with this are comfortable with the naming?

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: I'd like to thank my colleague for the question.

Yes. I have letters of support from both mayors of my communities: the lord mayor in the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake and the mayor in the city of Niagara Falls. I have discussed it with both of them, and as soon as they were aware that I wanted to come forward, they presented letters of support for that.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you.

Mr. Badawey, in your riding, I know that the meetings held in St. Catharines were focused around making sure that Brock University remained whole. That was one of the messages.

I know that in your submission, you talked about how the Niagara regional office is in your riding. I think the Niagara regional

office services Niagara West, Niagara South—all of them—so it doesn't make as much difference, but I see that Thorold has been a bit split up because of the population. They couldn't put any more people in St. Catharines and they couldn't put too many more in yours.

Did you seek the opinion of the member for St. Catharines, Chris Bittle, for what you're proposing?

Mr. Vance Badawey: Absolutely. Chris has been part of the process and has made a presentation, which I'm sure you are aware of. He made a presentation and made his thoughts known.

Essentially, it's a very simple ask. When we look at the line as you have it in front of you, again, as I mentioned in my presentation, there is really no logical reason to gerrymander the northern boundary separating the city of St. Catharines and the city of Thorold.

All I'm asking is to have that line continue down as it does in the east and as it does in the west, in the middle there. Simply continue it down straight. Don't make that little bump they've made.

That bump, by the way, takes out the city hall in Thorold. It takes out the regional headquarters, which was deliberately built in the city of Thorold to be in the middle of the region and, as it's in a smaller community, to give some respect to smaller communities throughout all 12 municipalities of Niagara. Of course, there's the Canada Games Park, which is at the tail end of the Brock University property. It also services the city of Thorold, with its two rinks and the rest of the services that are contained within the facility.

Again—

• (1115)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Okay. I have just a brief amount of time.

If I look at the street that Thorold city hall is on, the difficulty is that there are a bunch of Brock University residences there. There's the Foundry. I think that's what it's called.

Do you see any way of resolving those two things—trying to keep the Brock community whole and, at the same time, giving Thorold its city hall?

Mr. Vance Badawey: It's....

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Yes. Okay.

How many people will be added to your riding? You're already at 132,396.

Mr. Vance Badawey: With this bump taken out, it will be about 100 students who are part of that building that you referred to. Essentially, when you look at that bump....

You have to see the area from above. If you're looking down at it, it's all Thorold. You have the residences here. You have city hall, you have the regional headquarters and then you have the Canada Games Park. They're all right there, within the city of Thorold, along that roadway.

It's very hard to do this. All we're asking for is to continue that, consistent with the city's boundary. St. Catharines and Thorold—

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Now I'll turn to Mr. Fragiskatos.

I attended the London public hearing. It's unfortunate that Mr. Fragiskatos wasn't there, because Arielle Kayabaga was there, Lindsay Mathysen was there and Karen Vecchio was there. They were all having their say. Interestingly, Justice Leach, one of the commissioners, is from London.

What they consistently heard at that public hearing was that they hated the first redraw with the rural-urban mixes. There were about three of those. What they asked for was three urban ridings in London. That's what the commission has tried to do.

The reason they picked 37,000 and put them into the other one was that there weren't quite enough people to make four urban ridings, and they wanted to make sure that enough demographic from the urban part was put into Middlesex—London. This was the reasoning behind that.

Did you speak to any of the surrounding MPs about the proposal you have?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Ms. Gladu.

First of all, I didn't attend because I had parliamentary obligations. You would understand that. Sometimes we have to be here in Ottawa and it's unavoidable. We can't make certain events. As important as that was, I just couldn't be there.

I know Londoners who held an important point of view were there. It's the point of view that says communities' interest must remain intact. This is a principle, colleagues, as you know, that the Supreme Court has commented on. It is not as if it is a suggestion. This is an obligation.

I come at the issue from that perspective, Ms. Gladu.

Yes, I consulted with regional MPs. Some are ambivalent on the matter. Others disagree with my perspective. That's democracy.

I would ask you, Ms. Gladu, to put yourself into my shoes, representing these thousands of people who are now being put into another riding and community of interest.

I mentioned Stoneybrook. If anyone knows London, they'll know what the brooks are. Stoneybrook would be separated from Donnybrook, Phillbrook, Pennybrook and Bobbybrook. You might ask about the names. I don't know whether it's an urban myth or it's reality, but apparently they take the name of—

The Chair: All right. Thank you so much.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: —the contractor who built the area.

I hope that answers your question.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, thank you so much.

I will now turn the floor over to Mr. Turnbull.

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

Thanks to our witnesses for being here today. We appreciate your testimony, and we've read your submissions.

Mr. Badawey, I'll go to you first, and then I have some questions for Mr. Fragiskatos.

You mentioned the word “gerrymandering”. That word is sometimes used in these contexts, and you did something with your hand. It seems that they're drawing the boundaries in a way that really doesn't make sense.

I want to give you an opportunity to speak a bit more on why you would call it gerrymandering.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

It's simply because there's no logical reason for it. The boundary line they're proposing is consistent to the east and consistent to the west, and for some reason, right in the middle, they dip down and carve out part of the city of Thorold, which includes the city of Thorold's recreational facility, Canada Games Park, located on the grounds of Brock University, as well as Thorold City Hall and the regional headquarters.

Going back to Ms. Gladu's questions about trying to keep Brock University whole, that was never a concern with respect to our presentations to the commission. It's very consistent with Niagara College, for example. Niagara College belongs to Tony's riding and it belongs to my riding currently. It is still going to be that way, as it's both in Niagara-on-the-Lake—and part of St. Catharines, quite frankly, close to the tip of it—and in the city of Welland.

It's not inconsistent in Niagara to have two post-secondary institutions, the college and university, belonging to two municipalities.

• (1120)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that response.

I'll go to Mr. Fragiskatos now.

I read your submission. I think you were supportive of, generally, the initial proposal put forth by the commission with regard to the northern boundary of your riding. If I understand it correctly, because I'm not as familiar, obviously, with your riding as you are, it sounds like the movement of that boundary has sliced out individuals that would normally have considered themselves part of an urban riding. They are now going to be part of the Middlesex—London riding, which is predominantly rural.

It's always hard for us to put ourselves in the shoes of the local MP who really understands the dynamics of the local community. Can you speak to your case a bit more?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you for the question, Mr. Turnbull.

In principle, I have no problem with urban residents living in a rural riding. That does happen, and there's nothing inherently wrong with it. As I said, we're talking about 37,000 people, not 370 people.

I'm happy to table with the committee, Madam Chair, the map of current London North Centre. I've highlighted it.

This is the area of the brooks that I talked about before. This part would be kept in the proposed London Centre, currently under consideration. This part would be lost. As you can see, this is a continuous community of interest. Again, you're not a resident, so I'm not expecting you to know the ins and outs of London neighbourhoods, but it is an established neighbourhood in London, around for close to 40 years. The commission—and I don't discount the challenge in front of them—has decided, unfortunately, to sever this community of interest. That is a very serious issue and I think one that needs to be addressed.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Communities of interest hang together. There are reasons why they associate. Can you give us a bit more detail on why this is an established community of interest that should not be divided?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Of course. They share ambulance and fire services. They share shopping centres. They share schools. All the things that make a community, they share. If this were to be broken, I think the very important principle that this process needs to adhere to would be broken, by definition.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's something we've heard quite a lot at this committee. There's this tendency, when you get an initial proposal you actually agree with, not to speak out. Really, the consultation seems to be geared towards hearing objections. It's no surprise, then, even though, as you've said, you've had parliamentary duties, that in many other cases we've heard MPs not speaking out in that initial proposal when they were in agreement with it. This is the stage at which you're able to express the concerns brought to you by your constituents, and we appreciate your time today.

Do you want to speak to the potential flaws in the process itself?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Let me be clear, and interestingly, Ms. Gladu did not include this in her comment. Although I wasn't at the hearing that took place, there were individuals representing me who did voice their points of view. They did say that the initial proposal released in the summer of 2022 was a reasonable one, and it is. It adheres to the population quota of 116,000. It keeps communities of interest intact. I had no real challenges with that initial proposal.

In trying to solve concerns raised in other ridings, I think the commission has created a new problem. Why haven't regional MPs spoken out? Some might be ambivalent, but some might be worried about upsetting the apple cart, so to speak. If they were to raise objections at this point, perhaps they're worried about the situation reverting to what was originally the case and their problems would reappear.

I think that explains some lingering questions that might exist.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, go ahead.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for joining us. It must be a different experience for you to testify before a committee.

I want to give you time to explain what you think may have been missing in the process or in the documentation that was provided. Earlier, it was mentioned that it was important to take the pulse of the community and get its support. I would like to know if you have everything you need to show that what you are proposing respects the wishes of the people and of the locally elected officials. This would ensure that there is some compliance in the report. We must be vigilant. It is the committee's role to be vigilant and to reflect what is happening on the ground. That is why public consultations are important. I understand that we can't be in two places at once, but we must demonstrate that we are well aware of the situation.

I would like to say to Mr. Baldinelli that I am familiar with Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake. I see that it is a microclimate. I'd mention that Niagara Falls—Niagara-on-the-Lake is an appealing name, so I guess it's easier to explain to people the value of that change.

That said, I invite you to come and enjoy the special climate of Mont-Tremblant, which you may be familiar with and which is also an international hub for tourism.

If public opinion favours the name Niagara Falls—Niagara-on-the-Lake, why was the name Niagara North chosen instead?

[*English*]

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: As I mentioned in my remarks, I think the commission just sought to counterbalance the creation of the new riding my colleague will be in now, which will now be called Niagara South. To balance that, they called my riding Niagara North.

During the commission hearings, the public hearings that we both spoke to, a number of witnesses came forward and proposed different names for our riding to touch upon the historical perspective. The commission ultimately decided not to. I think they did that, again, to kind of counter the notion of Niagara South being created.

I'm here today to talk about the notion of why that shouldn't be done, because "Niagara North" is an innocuous term. You could live in Niagara-on-the-Lake, you could live in St. Catharines, you could live in Jordan, you could live in Beamsville, you could live in Grimsby or you could live in Winona. It's all part of the Niagara region, but you would be considered living in Niagara North.

What I'd like to do is have a better name that reflects the two communities, the commonalities and the communities of interest. Niagara and Niagara-on-the-Lake are home to the greatest concentration of War of 1812 sites anywhere in this country. There are battlefield sites in both ridings. We are Canada's wine region. Not only do we have the grape growers and the wineries in Niagara-on-the-Lake, but the largest production facility for wine in this country is in Niagara Falls.

I spoke to our community members as well as our local mayors and, with their support.... The riding will be the entirety of those two municipalities, so I thought it was a great idea to call it Niagara Falls—Niagara-on-the-Lake.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

Mr. Fragiskatos, would there be any additional or complementary items to submit, so that in the report we can have everything we need to convince the commissioners to make this change?

You mentioned that 37,000 people were affected. I don't know the specifics on the mobility of people and the demographic changes. A lot of times, predictions are made.

Do you have everything that is needed right now? If not, you still have time to submit documents before the report is completed.

• (1130)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you for the question.

For me, it's a matter of democracy. For example, our mayor's perspective is very important in our community, and his position is very clear.

[*English*]

This is not a fair approach. When you have a community of interest that is severed—and I've emphasized this point many times, but this is a key principle in all of this—then you have a problem.

Some might ask if I'm coming at this from a partisan perspective. It does not affect my interests electorally one way or the other. With the initial proposal, the numbers are the same. Basically, there might be some percentage difference, but I'm not doing it for partisan reasons. I think that needs to be made very clear.

I'm happy to table with you the map that I talked about, where it's clear that the community is being completely severed in half. I'm happy to—

The Chair: I thank you for that submission. The clerk looks forward to receiving it, and we will share it with all members. Offer made and accepted.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: That sounds good.

The Chair: Excellent. Offer made and accepted.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours.

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

I thank everybody who is here testifying today.

My first question is for Mr. Badawey.

There have already been questions asked around the Brock University campus and the fact that it's split between the two ridings. You mentioned that the commission was trying to keep the campus of Brock University together in one riding.

Have you done any work with that area to find out how the students feel and what the impacts will be on them if they continue to be split? It seems like there was an interest to bring them together,

and I'm wondering why that doesn't seem to be a major concern for you.

Mr. Vance Badawey: I've talked to the mayor and the council, and they have had a lot of those discussions, from what I understand. When you look at the student population in the area, the student population isn't just contained within the area they're cutting out, within that boundary change. When you look at the city's limits and at that piece, there are about 100 students in there with a newly created student residence. However, there are student residences all over the city of Thorold and the city of St. Catharines, so they are throughout the community.

The bottom line, Ms. Blaney, is the fact that there were a lot of changes made when they first proposed our riding, and I'm quite happy with what they're proposing now. We had the city of Thorold split in three when they first proposed the change. Now they have it somewhat whole. All we're asking for is to keep the boundary consistent with the municipal boundary, as is consistent with all four ridings throughout the region for the most part.

With regard to your question about the consultation of the students, we're looking at basically keeping Brock University whole except for the recreation facility that services the city of Thorold. Other than that, the rest of the campus is in the city of St. Catharines and in the St. Catharines riding. Also, the residence that's right next to city hall in Thorold would be captured in my riding, alongside a lot of residences throughout the city of Thorold.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I now come to Mr. Fragiskatos.

I'm really struggling with your intervention today. Based on the research that I did, it really sounds like, when the first Ontario proposal was released, a lot of Londoners were very unhappy about the proposed changes. There were a lot of people who came forward to advocate against the initial proposal, and it was a wide range of people, such as those from different community group sectors and from all three levels of government.

I'm really struggling to completely understand. We are now hearing that, while not everyone is entirely happy with the report, the majority are actually more pleased with the current report than they were with the last one. I'm just wondering if you could explain your perspective on this, as it's going to have a big impact on those other ridings. It sounds like the other folks who are representing those ridings are not really supporting what you're bringing forward. Would you agree that the initial proposal raised more concerns with Londoners than the current proposal we are looking at now?

• (1135)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you for the question.

There were certainly voices participating in the first process that raised objections, Ms. Blaney. Many were from NDP riding associations, but I'll leave that aside.

I would also point to the fact that, when a community's mayor speaks out, that speaks volumes about how the community feels on this particular issue.

It is a difficult job that the commission had. I would just ask that they go back and revisit what they have presented, because there is a very important need to ensure, yes, adherence to a population quota, but also adherence to the communities of interest principle.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Madam Chair. Those are all the questions I have.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

We'll now continue with Ms. Rood.

Ms. Lianne Rood (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here.

Mr. Fragiskatos, as you mentioned earlier in your remarks.... You implied that if someone resided in the city of London, they wouldn't be as well represented because you're adding part of a rural riding.

As somebody who currently represents Lambton—Kent—Middlesex and who is set to represent Middlesex—London as my new riding, I can speak to the fact, on behalf of many of my constituents residing in Middlesex County, that the rural population has a huge connection to the city of London, in this particular area. Our rural communities are an urban support network. In fact, the Middlesex County council chambers are located in downtown London.

You mentioned shared services and that these communities of interest would lose their shared services. I'd beg to say, on the flip side of this, that the county itself uses some of those same services, including health care, shopping centres, medical care, paramedics, etc.

I'm wondering whether you can comment on that. With this new change right now, why would you want to revert back to not having the urban part? Why don't you think somebody who was born in London, went to college in London and already represents all around the city of London, right up to the border of the city of London...? Why would those folks not feel they would be a part of the new riding?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Ms. Rood, for the question.

On your comments relating to shared services, I would simply ask you to raise those objections with those who live in the books and see what they say.

In principle, of course I have no problem with a member of Parliament representing an urban area and a rural area. Karen Vecchio does a superb job of it. I know she's your colleague and you respect her very much. She's an example of how an MP can balance both.

I would simply go back to the fact that we're talking, Ms. Rood, about 37,000 people. I'm sure you would be a good member of Parliament for those people. This is not a.... I don't mean to make, and I don't think I have made, this a personal issue. I am simply taking my cue from residents who—and I think it's fair—want to be represented by an urban MP because they see themselves, first and foremost, as Londoners. The mayor feels the same way—the mayor of London, the chief executive of the municipality. When he speaks out, I think we have to listen, Ms. Rood.

I don't discount your ability to represent. In fact, I would invite you to come to more London events. I'm sure we'd love to see you down there, because I haven't seen you at many London events in the past seven or eight years when I've been in.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you. I'm sure you will.

I want to say a few things about some of the people who made submissions and from whom we're not going to get to hear before the final draft report.

Michael Chong had a submission. In his riding, where the boundary is redrawn, three houses that pay taxes to the municipality were excluded. He's asking that they be made whole. I don't object to that.

I know Irek Kusmierczyk wants a name change as well, to add “Lakeshore” to his Windsor—Tecumseh name. It makes sense, because he has a huge portion of Lakeshore. Again, I don't have an issue with that.

Then there were a number of MPs who wrote in to say they liked the redrawn maps. If the committee is going to put in any commentary on what we could do to improve the process, it might be worthwhile to allow people to.... There's no forum to do anything but object, so it might be a good idea to have an ability for people to say, “Yes, I think this map is okay.” It's validation for the commissioners that they did a reasonable job.

How much time do I have left?

• (1140)

The Chair: You have 50 seconds.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: I'll give the 50 seconds back to you. I think I'm good, thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

As per the legislation, my understanding from the experts in the room is that an objection can be for or against. That's why so many people have provided submissions in support.

To reiterate your point, there are many colleagues who recognize that PROC has been seized with many activities. Therefore, as long as they are responding to the clerk and analysts—they're basically providing back our time—and letting them know that they support the recommendation—in the case of Mr. Chong, it's about three houses—I have been assured that it will be reported in the report. The committee will get to see the drafting of it.

I appreciate your raising that. There are more members from Ontario who have been listed. We provide the same ability to all members.... We appreciate them acknowledging that, if it's a riding name change or in support...there is another way of doing it. We will make sure they are represented within our report.

[Translation]

Mr. Fergus, go ahead.

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

I thank all of my colleagues who have appeared before the committee today.

Mr. Baldinelli and Mr. Badawey, you have outlined your concerns very well.

Mr. Fragiskatos, your presentation was also well done, but it seems to raise several questions. You mentioned the Mayor of London. What are his views on these changes?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you for the question, Mr. Fergus.

Our mayor's approach is based on equity. That is a very important principle in this process.

[*English*]

Fairness has to be underpinning all of this. Yes, for each action there is a reaction. When you call for changes, it raises the very real possibility, if not certainty, that they will affect other ridings. What am I to do, and what is the mayor to do, when a community that has been together for decades will now be separated?

I emphasized this in the last answer: It's not personal. It should not be personal. This is about representing the interests of constituents—thousands of people—who have lived together in neighbourhoods for many years and were quite surprised by this proposal.

Again, I emphasize that in the initial proposal, the community of interest was completely intact. There was no community of interest broken in the first proposal raised, at least for the proposed London Centre.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I obviously don't know London as well as you do, but I do know my region. I've seen what happens when you put a sizable amount of an urban riding into a rural setting. It's so much easier to spend a lot of time in that urban part because the demographic weight is there, the door knocking is a lot easier and some of the issues speak to it.... It's hard to find that right balance: 37,600 people would be at least 25% of any riding's population.

Can you comment on that?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: The commission has the point of view that this change is acceptable. As they put it, the inclusion of urban Londoners into the proposed Middlesex—London would add significant “demographic weight” to that riding. I don't believe that it would. I think they would be vastly outnumbered.

The mayor feels the same way. His point of view is that Londoners need to be represented by London-based MPs. We have the fastest-growing community in Ontario and the fourth fastest-growing community in all of Canada. To see 37,000 people put into a predominantly, if not overwhelmingly, rural riding raises real challenges from a representation point of view, which the mayor has put on the record and I'm voicing here.

• (1145)

Hon. Greg Fergus: That's a very good point. It's such a good point that you've distracted me from the next question I wanted to

ask. I was going through my head to try to remember the point I wanted to make.

Let's go back to what you just said about them being vastly outweighed. What alternative could there possibly be that wouldn't create that kind of situation?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Simply put, it's the initial proposal. The initial proposal did not break any community of interest, which put the population at a very reasonable number and very much in line with the quota.

Hon. Greg Fergus: I have one last question, then. By making these changes and this coming after the process.... Can you speak to the whole process of redistribution? Is there perhaps a better way?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Yes. We took part in the process from start to finish. There was far too much attention given to the quota requirement versus communities of interest. That needs to be absolutely revisited by any future commission, without question, among other things that we could talk about.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

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

I have already had all of my questions answered. I conclude that, again, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs will need to think about criteria and weighting in its work so that the commissioners can manage the changes that did not exist a few decades ago.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I have no further questions.

The Chair: That's excellent. I think we are very content with the information you have provided us today, colleagues, and we thank you for your time and attention. As has been mentioned, if there's anything else you would like the committee to consider, please send it to the clerk, and the clerk will share it with all colleagues.

Once again, everything that is provided to our committee—we don't get to pick and choose—goes back to the commission. It is always valuable for you to provide us information.

With that, have a great day. We have another panel, and we will suspend and ask the next panel to join us.

It's about 10 minutes before the next panel, so we might suspend a bit longer than usual.

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sure everybody can grab a snack. I'm not there to do that.

I have a question. I know we sent out a letter requesting a couple of witnesses to come. It's been about a week, so I just want to check in to see if we've had a response to that.

The Chair: I asked the same question. I can confirm that the letter was sent out on Friday, the day following the subcommittee meeting, and we have not yet received a response to it. That was the letter in regard to the motion and having Mr. Solomon and Ms. Michaud appear before committee. They have not provided their availability or acknowledged receipt of the letter yet.

• (1150)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I'm just wondering what the normal process is and how long we should wait before we take further steps.

I think this study is very important, and those witnesses are required for us to do the work we need to do. I'm just looking for advice on whether the next step is to send a letter to summon them or to wait another couple of days. I don't think we need to wait a significantly long time. We have sent a couple of invitations now and a specific invitation, and it feels like we're not getting a response. That concerns me.

I'd love to hear from the rest of the committee.

The Chair: As we always say, it's up to members to decide their path forward and how they would like to move. If members of the committee choose to escalate it, then that's the members' choice. It's similar to what we did in the subcommittee when we had not received a response. A person had declined the invitation, and then we chose to reiterate our point by sending a letter. If members would like to do that, it would be up to members.

Ms. Sahota's hand is up.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I think we have some options before us. It's worth discussing among the committee what our next steps are.

I'm interested in hearing from the witnesses. What do committee members—since the chair just said that it's really up to the committee—think the next steps should be? Should there be a more sternly worded letter? Should it be a summons to this committee? What action should we be taking?

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I just want to express my support for the concerns that Ms. Blaney has expressed. I think we do need to be considering next steps.

I feel that the testimony of certain witnesses is needed. I have very specific questions for some of the witnesses who have not responded thus far. They are germane to our study. We've all identified foreign election interference as such an important topic today. We're constantly reminded of how important this is. In a real effort to get to the truth and the bottom of the issue and to do a thorough job, we need those witnesses to appear.

I just wanted to express my support for what Ms. Blaney was sharing in terms of concerns.

The Chair: Seeing no other hands up, I think what I'm hearing is that committee members want to have a discussion on how we want to proceed.

The House is not sitting tomorrow, and I know we have a heavy agenda next week. Some of our requests for extra time have been approved. We will be meeting not only on Tuesday morning, our normal slot, but also on Tuesday evening, as well as on Thursday. We're just slotting in witnesses, including those witnesses who were not able to join us on Tuesday evening. Then we will have a new status on who is outstanding, who is not outstanding and what we received as responses. The committee can get a sense of how much more time is needed for everyone to appear.

Perhaps I will suggest that committee members have some conversations on the side. Then we can see how we want to approach this. If we need to adjust the schedule for next week, then we can do that accordingly and ensure that we satisfy what feels to be the will of the majority, which is to have witnesses testify so that we can actually get the information we're looking for.

Did your hand go up, Ms. Sahota?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: It did go up, but I think the rest of what you just stated has satisfied my need to come up with a resolution today. That's fine. We'll take the conversation to the side and come up with a solution for the next meeting.

Thank you.

The Chair: I have Ms. Blaney next, followed by Madame Gaudreau.

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I guess I need one bit of clarity. Is there an opportunity for us to perhaps put half an hour into this next week when we're meeting if it can't be resolved off-line? I just think we need to get this done. I don't know whether it should be a strongly worded letter that says, "If you don't, then we're going to do this", or we should just move forward.

If I have it correctly, we've already sent two letters, one making a request and the second one making a more forceful request. Maybe it is time to just move on to the summoning portion of this discussion.

• (1155)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Gaudreau, go ahead.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I have two concerns.

First, we must take into consideration that we have an exceptional time slot on Tuesday night. I am also taking into consideration what we experienced last week. Not only are we not moving at the pace that we should be moving, but, in addition, there were witnesses who were willing to come testify. This is my concern. My question is, does the Standing Committee on Finance have priority? If so, what should we be doing to ensure that the process continues? From what I hear from my colleagues, they do find it important to continue the process.

My second concern is about having time to look at our planning, as time is running out.

[*English*]

The Chair: I think the information I require for us to move forward is this: Is this a conversation we're looking to have in camera or is this a public conversation? It's an in camera conversation. Is that correct?

There's good news. We have been given the extra hour on Tuesday morning from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. What we can do is plan for an in camera conversation for that hour. If we finish early, then the witnesses we have lined up for 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. will remain in public meetings. I think that will perhaps provide all members an opportunity to engage in conversation. It would also provide an opportunity for the clerk and me to look at what processes we need to follow so I can provide you with the insights you are requesting.

This conversation will continue in camera at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, May 9.

May the 4th be with you.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: With that, we're suspending for five minutes, after which we will continue with our second panel. Please stay tuned.

Thank you.

• (1155) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We are resuming the meeting.

For our second panel today, we have with us five members of Parliament: Charlie Angus, the member for Timmins—James Bay; Carol Hughes, the member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskas- ing; Viviane Lapointe, the member for Sudbury; Marc Serré, the member for Nickel Belt; and Terry Sheehan, the member for Sault Ste. Marie.

You will each have four minutes to make an opening statement, after which we will go to questions from members of the committee.

Ms. Lapointe, we will start with you. Welcome.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe (Sudbury, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Respected colleagues, I speak to you today both as chair of the Northern Ontario Liberal Caucus and as the Member of Parliament for Sudbury.

[*English*]

On behalf of the northern Ontario Liberal caucus, I would like to express our collective objection to the removal of an electoral district for northern Ontario. This objection is not about politics. Rather, this objection is rooted in advocacy.

Northern Ontario is unique from all other regions in Ontario due largely to its immense land mass. In fact, northern Ontario makes up 87% of Ontario's land mass. Reducing our representation to nine elected officials creates undue hardship and inequitable access to MPs for the people of northern Ontario. This undue hardship will also create greater challenges in attracting young people, especially women, to consider running for Parliament.

Land mass also affects communities of interest. Communities that are several hours apart may not have a common economy or shared issues. The loss of a seat may also have social and economic implications.

Northern Ontario has unique characteristics, such as a large indigenous population, and unique challenges, such as limited access to social services, health care and education. These issues require targeted policies that address the specific needs of the region. Removing a seat from northern Ontario would cut off an essential avenue for the region's voice to be heard.

Going by a numbers-only formula actually creates further voter disparity. It increases inequity and creates prejudice against rural and northern Canadian communities.

We believe the commission understood this inequality by creating two ridings of "extraordinary circumstance". While the legislative path may be the ultimate manner in which equitable representation can be achieved, we cannot accept that there are no measures the commission can employ.

We have seen precedents that address the issue of land mass. The 1985 Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act provided for the Newfoundland and Labrador commission to deviate from adherence to the quota in order to maintain a manageable geographic size for sparsely populated districts.

In a vast country like ours, where each region has distinctive needs and priorities, representational equality is fundamental. The electoral district model is designed to ensure that citizens from each region are proportionally represented in the House of Commons. Any action that changes the number of seats provided to a region can affect its political representation entirely.

In conclusion, reducing the number of seats in northern Ontario is not the solution to any problem. Instead, it would create problems of its own by reducing the ability of the region's elected representatives to represent the interests of the people they serve.

• (1205)

[Translation]

Thank you for your attention.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The redistribution proposal for northern Ontario represents a massive disruption in political representation. It arbitrarily breaks apart communities of interest and is predicated on the fundamentally flawed proposition that even though northern Ontario's population has grown since the last boundary changes, it isn't growing as fast as the explosive population growth in suburban-urban southern Ontario. From this flows the second false promise: that rural Ontario is now somehow overrepresented in Parliament and must give up a seat to accommodate the suburban-urban south.

The impacts on the right of rural residents to representation will be immense. Our ridings are already massive in area. My riding is bigger than France. These immense ridings have populations that are comparable or larger than many rural regions in Canada. My riding is the same size as or is larger than 44 other ridings in the country, yet I am told that I don't have enough people in my riding to deserve representation.

The issue we're concerned about is that removing the riding of Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing is going to have a domino effect on already untenably large ridings that are difficult to represent. Our region of northeastern Ontario, with a population that is rural, indigenous and Franco-Ontarian, will never be able to keep up with the huge population growth expected in the coming years in southern Ontario. If we accept the premise of this change, it means that in future years our regions will have to give up more seats in order to accommodate the expected growth.

In the first round, the boundaries commission stated its intention to create the riding of Kiiwetinoong—Mushkegowuk. An arbitrary line on the map created a riding so massive that you could fit 100 other Ontario seats into it. This was obviously a ridiculous proposition.

It was fair to expect that in the second round the commission would come up with minor changes and respond to feedback. The problem was that they ignored consensus from across the region and presented, in the second round, equally dramatic and arbitrary new boundary lines, which are now threatening to break apart many of the regions and communities that have been together culturally, economically and socially for decades.

In my riding, for example, the commission ignored suggestions on how to increase population, and in the second round, arbitrarily moved the line 130 kilometres north of where it is now. That cuts the francophone region of Temiskaming in half and moves numerous communities out of their traditional centre. There was no consultation, and now there is no ability for those communities to speak, because this was done in the second round.

The commissioners ignored their obligation as laid out in paragraph 15(1)(b), which states that several factors must be considered:

(i) the community of interest or community of identity in or the historical pattern of an electoral district in the province, and

(ii) a manageable geographic size for districts in sparsely populated, rural or northern regions of the province.

They also have, under subsection 15(2), the right to depart from population parity “in order to maintain a manageable geographic size for districts in sparsely populated, rural or northern regions of the province”.

We already suffer from a high level of political alienation in northern Ontario. We are in a very fragile time for democracy. We must do our best to reassure citizens that their voice counts and that they are being heard.

This is why I recommend, along with my colleagues, the status quo for the communities and electors in northern Ontario.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sheehan, you are next.

Mr. Terry Sheehan (Sault Ste. Marie, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks to the committee for allowing me to present an argument in favour of fair and equitable representation in northern Ontario.

As committee members are aware, the act permits the commission to consider the relative geographical size of the districts, particularly for remote communities, allowing for “effective representation”. This has been upheld in the Saskatchewan reference regarding provincial electoral boundaries.

This was respected when drawing up some of the ridings in northern Ontario, but not the new riding of Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma. Variances from the quota range from 10% below in Parry Sound—Muskoka to as much as 47% quota in the new Kenora riding that has been proposed. The new riding of Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma is only 2.4% below the variance, but the riding is much bigger than many.

By population, the proposed changes to the Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma riding will have populations comparable to many in the south, but by geography it is much larger. In fact, it must be acknowledged that at least nine of the proposed ridings in the city of Toronto and another four in the GTA have populations that are actually smaller than that of the proposed new Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma riding.

For the three ridings in northwestern Ontario, the commission declared “special circumstances” that allowed them to exceed the 25% variance, mostly leaving the region unchanged from existing boundaries. However, they ignored the same logic when drawing boundaries for the northeast, creating ridings that were large in both population and geography. These special circumstances should have been applied across northern Ontario.

In creating their revised recommendations, the commission acknowledged and pointed out in their original proposal that for the member for Kenora—Thunder Bay—Rainy—and I'll quote right out of the report—“the travel time would be substantial: a Member of Parliament would need to travel over 1,000 km to drive the Highway 11 and Highway 17 circuit from Thunder Bay to Rainy River...and back to Thunder Bay.”

However, in the new proposed Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma riding, to do the exact same thing the commission has proposed, it would be 1,300 kilometres to drive to serve the same area. Meanwhile, in a place like Toronto—Danforth, which has a much smaller population than the new proposal, it takes 10 minutes to drive across it. Again, this is completely flawed logic that the commission has placed in the final proposal.

It's clear that when designing this, the commission did not use for these communities any of the latitude afforded to it for remote and geographic areas. In principle, I strongly believe that northern Ontario should maintain its current 10 members, preferably in adhering to the existing boundaries. As has been mentioned, we are 90% of the geography of Ontario with about 6% to 8% of the population. Regarding communities of interest, this certainly affects rural and remote areas and indigenous and francophone communities.

Failing that, I would prefer that the commission take another look at the region to make its vast remote regions more manageable. They need to acknowledge that special circumstances exist throughout the north, and they need to consult accordingly. On their final proposal, they did not consult any of the communities that have been affected, and that's wrong. It's flawed right from the get-go.

Again, status quo, based upon their logic for half of northern Ontario, should be applied to all of northern Ontario.

Thank you very much. I appreciate this.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate it as well.

Now we will go to Monsieur Serré.

• (1215)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the committee members for listening to us today.

As was mentioned, it is very difficult to go from 10 to nine ridings in northern Ontario. In the document, you can see northeastern Ontario on the map. It is not northwestern Ontario; there is a difference. I agree with everything that has been said so far.

I would like to start on a positive note. Concerning Nickel Belt, the commission listened to the people in the Gogama community,

for example. They had sent letters asking that this small community remain in Nickel Belt. In addition, in the redistribution, the four municipalities in Sudbury East whose mayors had requested that they remain in Nickel Belt. That's in the submission letter. So those are positive things.

Today I will present three items, which are detailed in the document you received.

First, the Nickel Belt constituency, which was founded in 1952, included the Nickel Centre communities of Wanup, Wahnapiatae, Coniston, Garson, Falconbridge and Skead. Essentially, these are rural areas. Last summer, the commission saw fit to attach these rural communities to downtown Sudbury, and that is still what the commission's report says. Once again, the rural area is being mixed with the urban area. I have received letters from city councillors Deb McIntosh and Mike Jakubo, as well as from the new city councillor Natalie Labbé. They all said they wanted these rural communities to remain in Nickel Belt, which is more of a rural riding, rather than being put with the downtown.

An argument was also made that communities of interest and the francophone community should be considered. Under the current proposal, Nickel Belt would go from being 35% francophone to 31%. This is better than last summer's proposal, which would have reduced the percentage to 25%. So the commission was listening, but it didn't do enough to keep the 10 ridings.

I have no objection to adding Espanola and Manitoulin Island to Nickel Belt. The population going from 100,000 to 114,000 is not an issue.

The second point I want to make is about the name of the riding.

[*English*]

Nickel Belt has been the riding name since 1952. It's been 72 years. The riding has changed, so the proposal here is to make Sudbury East Manitoulin—Nickel Belt. It's supported by the Sudbury east and Manitoulin health units, because it has the same boundaries. The municipalities of Sudbury east and SEMA have a letter in the package indicating that the mayors and councils support the name change to better reflect the community.

The last point on the commission here—and you've all heard this—is that it was really devastating for us in northern Ontario to go from 10 to nine seats. We could get into the disenchantment of voters and the rural aspect. It's devastating for us.

When you look at involving more MPs in the process, the commission had a difficult mandate with one additional seat, but I'm asking PROC to really push back on this, because as indicated earlier by Charlie, the next round in northern Ontario will be eight seats. Because of the population of 116,000, it's totally flawed. As indicated by Terry and Viviane, 90% of the geographic area of Ontario is northern Ontario. You could add more monies to a riding that represents 140,000.... We could add more monies for two staff members, but you can't add more money to get more MPs to represent a large area.

I'll leave it at that, and I'll be very happy to answer questions.

The Chair: We can't wait to ask you questions. Thank you for that.

Mrs. Hughes, welcome.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Thank you for this opportunity to speak.

As you know, I represent the riding of Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, but the issue is not about me. It's about my riding and the representation of the people of northern Ontario, as you never know who is going to represent the ridings.

Redistribution of electoral districts should not be a threat to small rural communities in northern Ontario, whose voices could be lost if the redistribution exercise rather focuses on population growth. Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing has also experienced population growth, as has northern Ontario as a whole, although not as rapidly as the more populous southern Ontario.

I remember when Jack Layton came to my riding in northern Ontario, he was impressed with the size of the territory. He said that he could cycle from one end of his riding to the other in half an hour.

This goes to show how vast northern Ontario is. It accounts for 88% of the province's land mass. Yet, under the current proposal, northern Ontario would account for just over 7% of Ontario's electoral districts. This is a significant disparity in geographic representation.

• (1220)

[*English*]

I also want to remind you that the Supreme Court previously ruled in the 1991 Carter decision that Canadian democracy is rooted in the ability for citizens to be effectively represented, with Justice McLachlin stating “Effective representation and good government in this country compel that factors other than voter parity, such as geography and community interests, be taken into account in setting electoral boundaries.”

These are all principles laid out in the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act. However, I believe that the commission has not placed enough focus on geography and communities of interest when finalizing its report.

Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing comprises a vast geography, encompassing many communities of interest, including distinct francophone communities, many first nations and a diverse collection of small towns and rural communities. To give you an

idea, the riding has 40 municipalities, some of which are composed of multiple towns; 17 first nations; a number of unorganized townships, such as Sultan, Foleyet, Willisville, Whitefish Falls, Hawk Junction and more

Is there an issue?

The Chair: There's no issue. If you can, just slow down a bit.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I provided my presentation in both official languages. I'm sorry about that.

In northern Ontario, communities often lack the infrastructure that is available to people in other regions of the province, including access to Service Canada and other governmental offices and agencies, unlike what they have in southern Ontario; high-speed Internet and cellular services; and public transportation.

Reducing the number of electoral districts would be detrimental to those citizens. I am concerned that the current proposal to eliminate Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing as an electoral district will disenfranchise people from the electoral process, as well as the recruitment—as mentioned by my colleague from Sudbury—of potential candidates for office, especially women or young people.

I should also note that the final proposal from the electoral boundaries commission of Ontario, while based on some of the feedback received during the consultation period as it related to the initial report, differs greatly from its initial proposal and has not received public feedback. To make such sweeping changes to even the initial proposal without giving citizens the opportunity to voice their concerns is concerning.

As I close my initial remarks, I urge this committee to reconsider the drastic changes in northern Ontario. If we look at Brampton, for example, they're putting in a sixth MP. We're talking about 265 square kilometres, and there are currently five MPPs as well who represent that area. They have a lot more resources. I'm not saying they shouldn't have more representation. What I'm saying is it's not equitable compared to what we have to travel in northern Ontario and represent.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

I acknowledge that you were all really good to provide your comments to interpreters beforehand. They still need to read it into the record. That's where the disconnect sometimes happens. I was listening to the French. It's a long title. Kapuskaing just isn't something that people say all the time. Maybe we should say it more often.

With that, we're going into six-minute rounds. We'll start with Ms. Gladu.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I have a little procedural thing before we start. I noticed that Monsieur Serré's submission was submitted on March 10, and Mr. Garneau has signed it, but he stepped down as MP on March 8. Do we have to have a unanimous consent motion or anything to consider it? I'm sure he could get a signature from any one of us here. I don't know if that's a deal or not, Chair. Okay. That's fine.

Let me go into my questions. I'll start off with Monsieur Serré.

There are a number of places within your riding—Garson, Falconbridge, Skead, etc.—that you mentioned are going to be impacted. Are these separate municipalities? Who do they pay taxes to?

• (1225)

Mr. Marc Serré: Thanks for the clarification and the question.

The city of Sudbury was amalgamated 22 years ago. There were seven municipalities. Now there's one municipality and there are 12 wards. These areas are now wards. Basically, there are 12 wards. I have six wards, Viviane has six wards and we have one mayor.

That area we're talking about, Coniston, had its own council. Now it has two councillors, who I cited in the report.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Mr. Angus, you talked about the growth rate of northern Ontario not keeping up with that of the rest of the province. I know we heard that the GTA is growing at 6%, and the rest of Ontario is at 13%. What's the growth rate in northern Ontario?

Mr. Charlie Angus: I think we've been growing at just above 2%; however, in the last few years, we've seen a significant increase. We were stopped a bit by COVID, but there has been, in particular, South Asian immigration and francophone immigration from Africa. There's been a big promotion to maintain a balance between English-speaking and francophone people.

All of our communities now, since the last census, have seen huge transformations in terms of multicultural presence. All of those communities are growing, particularly the larger ones. Some of that is not reflected in the statistics, but there's no way those communities will ever.... Kirkland Lake will simply never be able to grow as fast as Mississauga.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: One thing I noted was that all of you in the north did a great job at the beginning of looking for the status quo and sending letters, and a lot of your communities sent letters. However, the commission didn't seem to listen to that with the re-draw. What new information are you bringing forward that you think will convince them?

We'll go one at a time, from Charlie over to Viviane.

Mr. Charlie Angus: When they came to Timmins, the commission came up to me and asked if I had suggestions. I knew they were looking to increase our population. As I said, 44 other ridings have a smaller population than mine. I offered them, for example, the Temiskaming Shores region, which would add 13,000 people. I

offered to take in the Ring of Fire region, which is extremely isolated, but we already represent some of those communities.

I was shocked that the whole agricultural district was taken apart and moved, and we had no involvement in that. Nobody was aware of that. They'd asked for suggestions on how we'd work with them, and we gave them suggestions, again based on communities of interest, particularly on the francophone and agricultural sectors that are growing on Highway 11. Then we get this back and we were told this is the final plan.

I have to go back to the farm communities now and say, "Guess what, Matheson, Val Gagné and Cochrane. You're all connected to Temiskaming, but you guys are now in different electoral districts." They'll say, "Where did that come from?"

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Go ahead, Mrs. Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: As you saw, a lot of our arguments are similar, because it's a huge riding. These are huge ridings. The demographics are there. As I've indicated as well, we weren't against certain changes. Foleyet could easily go into the Timmins area.

We can't make up population. We have been growing in the north by approximately 2.8%. Also, the number of consultations didn't really allow for these communities to participate. There was one in Timmins. There was nothing in my riding at all. There was one in Thunder Bay, and one in.... There wasn't even one in Sudbury, which is the largest community.

I think certainly the process is there. I know they were really looking to see how best to do this, but their focus from the beginning was to remove that seat from northern Ontario. Also, as mentioned by Mr. Sheehan, what was applied in one area wasn't really applied in this area here, so we need to rethink how we do these ridings.

I know there might be some legislative processes that we would need to do in the future, but the commission does have a responsibility to ensure that these communities have the representation they need and deserve based on factors other than population.

I just want to add as well that the commission in this round has basically taken Sagamok away from Massey. Massey and Webbwood are communities in the township of Sables-Spanish Rivers, and to get to Sagamok you cross the bridge. It's just a bridge that divides them, so you can't really split them up and take them away. I understand the commission's thought of trying to put all the indigenous communities from that tribal council together, but it doesn't make sense to split up those communities.

• (1230)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: I'm out of time, but I'll get to the rest of you in the next round.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so much, and as someone who occupies the Speaker's chair every so often, perhaps you'll remember this courtesy, Mrs. Hughes, the next time.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: It was about 28 seconds, for the record, so maybe you can meet me halfway.

Go ahead, Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think that was a very good line of questioning. I'm really interested in learning more about growth. Although it may be slower, there is still growth. I'm surprised by that. I didn't realize there was growth happening in northern Ontario. I appreciate the offer to increase staffing in my riding. If only you had the power. I wish I could take you up on that.

My constituency riding work is very intense, but after listening to all of the panellists today, I sympathize with how difficult representing northern rural ridings must be, with having to travel such large distances. I know we don't serve geography necessarily, but the smaller communities you serve are so far apart from each other, and in order to serve them, you have to travel through those geographic locations to get to them and to listen to them.

I would love to learn from the members who didn't get to speak so far.

Ms. Lapointe, Mr. Serré and Mr. Sheehan, could you let me know what the growth has been like in your ridings, what challenges you find in terms of how many communities you serve and how long it takes you to get to those communities? It was also mentioned by Mrs. Hughes that there hadn't been consultations that were accessible to the public in your areas. Could you shed some more light on where the consultations were located in your ridings and whether there were virtual options? Were there issues with the virtual options? This is about the many challenges your regions must face.

Go ahead, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré: There are a number of things. First, there was an in-person consultation in Timmins, which is a three-and-a-half hour drive from my area and six hours from Sault Ste. Marie. The affected riding was Algoma—Kapuskaing, which is even another five to six hours. There's nothing wrong with having the consultation in Timmins, but that wasn't the affected riding, so that was bizarre and we tried to have it changed. There was a virtual option, which is difficult as some areas don't have high-speed Internet. The commission added that at the end because there were so many submissions.

You saw the number of submissions in my package. Nickel Belt received the second-largest number of submissions of any riding in Ontario, but essentially you see that colleges, mayors, organizations, francophones and first nations objected.

Also, to Marilyn's point, in 2012 the commission stayed with the status quo on the 10 seats. Why in 10 years did they change it? It is because they say it's their mandate to have one additional seat in Ontario. That's why the recommendation for something new—for example, in a larger riding that has a population of 140,000 or 150,000—is to add two staff members. You could do that to deal with the population, but you can't split an MP in two.

What was also said here is that in rural areas, there are a large number of—and I'll mention the party—PPC votes in northern Ontario because people are disenfranchised with the political system. If we look at the increase in votes, it was close to 10% in Nickel Belt on the PPC side. Rural areas are being...and it's going to be even worse now because from 10 seats, we're going to nine seats.

To answer that question, as far as the representation itself is concerned, it's a big issue for us moving forward.

• (1235)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Go ahead, Mr. Sheehan.

Mr. Terry Sheehan: I think you're asking about the growth of 2.8%. That's amazing. I've spent my life in business and economic development in northern Ontario and we were always below growth. We didn't have any growth. That growth is from indigenous populations and immigration. We have newcomers coming in not just to go to school but to live, and they're choosing northern Ontario as their first destination. It's great. We're seeing so many really cool things happening all across there.

However, what I'm afraid of, and I've mentioned this before.... In particular, we saw some other growth too during COVID-19. People who were jammed in larger urban centres who may have lived in northern Ontario have chosen to return. That trend started, and you're seeing it more and more when you're communicating with residents in northern Ontario. That trend is not going to stop, because people can do things virtually. They can combine virtual with in-person stuff too.

My point is that 2.8% is mega huge for northern Ontario. My fear is that what the commission has done is going to negatively affect that growth, and we do not want to backslide.

I hope I've answered your question on the growth piece. I'll turn it to Viviane.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: I'll just say that from the beginning of this process, we all came together and have addressed the commission's report as a collectivity. Our position, though, was never status quo.

We understand the commission's work and the very difficult task before it. There are some regions with population growth and some have population decline. That is why it is embedded in the act that electoral boundaries be reviewed every 10 years.

We were always willing to work with the commission to look at some riding changes. I think what is different and new for us is that the commission created two new additional “extraordinary circumstance” ridings. As we know, when you make decisions, it has a domino effect on other ridings. I would suggest to you that it created a really severe domino effect to the northeast.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, go ahead.

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

Respected colleagues, I want to say that this is the same situation we had a month ago; it is a cut and paste. Honestly, it disheartens me.

We have really heard all the criteria—for example, the size of the territory and the services provided. You can have lots of people everywhere, but you need a budget. We also heard about the ability to have Internet access. For that, Internet services must be available on the territory. Then we heard about fairness in representation. On top of that, we learned that some citizens, who did not have Internet access at home, had to drive two hours to attend consultations in person. We also experienced this situation in Laurentides—Labelle, even though the riding is smaller than Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

From the beginning, we have been hearing about criteria, thresholds and all that. Obviously, the criteria exist. The problem is not the lack of criteria or representativeness. It's more about what gets prioritized.

Personally, I am already thinking about the next redistribution process. I would hope that we will be listened to, that our report will be read, and that the objections that are valid and warranted will be heard. Each time, the commissions ask members of Parliament to complete the consultations and give them more information because they need to be heard.

If I have any hope, it is because of what I saw in the consultations about my own riding. I, too, completely disapproved of the idea of eastern Quebec having one less riding and people having to travel thousands of kilometres. Instead of having three regions, six regional county municipalities and fragmented municipalities, I made another proposal, and they listened to me, or listened to the community, I should say.

I would hope that, even though this is meant to be a final report, the objections made will be heard, pending the next redistribution process, which is 10 years away. That's really one of my concerns. That's why I'm discouraged. Maybe it's also because it's Thursday and we've had a good week.

I have one or two minutes left. I'd like you to use that time to tell us about the criteria. You are the ones who are living with the situation in terms of services to citizens. What criteria should be prioritized?

• (1240)

Mr. Marc Serré: I must say that the desired range of 116,000 people, which applies across Ontario, is unacceptable. Ontarian and francophone associations have asked us to ensure that communities

of interest and francophone communities will be respected in each riding. I am talking about the Association canadienne-française de l'Ontario du Grand Sudbury and other francophone community groups.

As was mentioned earlier, does the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs have the authority to recommend to the Board of Internal Economy that it look at ridings? Extra money is given to rural ridings, but I believe that extra money should also be given to ridings of 140,000 people. That way we can keep our ridings. That's a pretty specific recommendation that you can make. It would ensure that we don't fall to eight ridings after the next redistributing process in 10 years.

[*English*]

Mr. Charlie Angus: The problem is that I've been through three rounds. In northern Ontario, it has been traumatic. I was elected after they ripped apart the ridings the last time. It took 10 years to build a community of interest. Then they suddenly said, “Well, that community of interest no longer exists.”

The Kapuskasing region, which is heavily francophone, fought for a long time to have its voice heard. Now it's going to be thrown in with Timmins, and all of my other communities are taken out.

I will quickly say that what we need to do in the future is this: The commission has to come forward and say, “What are people thinking?” There are ways.... None of our ridings make sense. They're all arbitrary and crazy. We've learned to work with them.

We probably would have brought a lot of opportunities to say these communities of interest.... We've talked among ourselves. None of that happened. They said, “This is what it's going to be.” Then, when there was overwhelming objection from every single economic, community and cultural organization—

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Political bodies....

Mr. Charlie Angus: —and from political bodies, it was overwhelming. There was no ability for people to be heard.

Again, it's outrageous that in northern Ontario, someone had to drive six hours at night on northern Ontario roads to get from Sault Ste. Marie to Timmins to be heard. They wouldn't even go to the ridings that were being cut.

There needs to be a pre-discussion. Come forward with a plan, then let citizens have options.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I agree with my colleagues. It is obvious that, in northern Ontario, providing services to people is difficult. I go from community to community to provide community workshops. However, we must not forget that it is very difficult for members to travel. The territory to be covered is stretched out, and it will be even more so. For example, I have to drive to Ottawa, which is a six-hour drive. There are almost no flights I can take. The schedule is really inconvenient for us as MPs. We go home on Friday night, have Saturday in our constituency, then have to come back to Ottawa on Sunday.

When the riding of Kiiwetinoong—Mushkegowuk was suggested, we pointed out that the MP would have to arrive and leave in the same day, as there are no flight options. This does not really provide the representation that people need. We really need to consider providing representation to people, as well as their need to be represented.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I thank everyone testifying today.

My first question is for MP Angus.

Is your opposition to cutting a seat in northern Ontario about protecting your own riding?

Mr. Charlie Angus: I think that's a very fair question. I think those are questions we always have to consider.

Obviously we check the poll data based on what we're going to face. In the new riding, I pick up a 19-point win based on electoral votes over the second-place party. I'm not here for me. I'm thinking, "Who the hell is ever going to want to run in that riding when I'm gone?" That's the issue. It is about representation. Personally I win better, but we lose bigger.

I want to say, quickly, that we've talked about distance. We haven't talked about the fact that many in my communities have no roads. Do you know that it's cheaper for you to fly to Portugal for the weekend and stay in a hotel with your spouse than it is for one of my citizens from Peawanuck to come to my constituency office in Timmins? The cost of flying to get to my office—for one of my citizens—is usually about \$2,000 to \$3,000. There's no other way to get to my office. I have to rent planes to go there.

● (1245)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I think this is the important part. I have a rural riding as well, and I have quite a few hours.... I'm on an island and I represent part of the Mainland. I know there are a lot of communities in my riding accessible only by float plane or boat that do not have the services, so they have to travel a significant amount of time to get basic services.

I think what you all talked about was the fact that your offices provide services to people that an urban riding would never have to provide. There is no other resource.

I'm wondering whether you could talk about the importance of that, and what it means to lose a seat in this region for people trying to access those services.

Madame Hughes, I'll start with you.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Certainly, that is a challenge.

It's important for people to access our services. We've been getting tons of immigration. I understand that the urban areas certainly get that as well, but it's more challenging for us because we don't have as many of the resources as they have in the bigger centres.

For individuals, as Charlie has said, the travel is substantial. I have to fly to Sudbury or Sault Ste. Marie to get there, and it's still a couple of hours' drive to my riding to go to one of my offices.

In order to provide proper representation to individuals, yes, we need better budgets, but we also need to make sure that MPs are able to get to constituents to provide those types of services. As mentioned over and over again, this is about representation in Parliament, and this is about representation for individuals themselves.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Does anyone else from the table want to answer the question?

Mr. Terry Sheehan: I'll add some stuff to the two comments made.

Sault Ste. Marie itself has an excellent high-speed Internet connection, some top stuff. We have the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation, which is a huge backbone there. I was able to do my presentation virtually to the commission. I pointed out to them as well that if you drive north of Sault Ste. Marie towards Wawa, Internet and cell service are non-existent in most places. That highway is closed so many times in the winter—if anybody has ever driven across Highway 17—and not for hours but for days sometimes. It's about fairness, it's about equity and it's about representation. I draw that...not only in the winter but for all of northern Ontario.

There are highway collisions. It's not a four-lane highway; it's a two-lane highway. Highway collisions with wildlife take a lot of lives, and it's very unfortunate.

By creating less representation that's going down, it's forcing, as the other two speakers have mentioned, people to drive and travel more. That's a safety issue. It's also an issue about equity—being rich versus poverty. Some people can afford a satellite connection, but in many places in northern Ontario, it's very difficult to get because of the storms and it's unreliable. My point is that it's about equity, and taking a seat away is not proper.

The biggest problem is that we're comparing northern Ontario to southern Ontario, which has been mentioned by Mr. Serré. It's about population. However, northern Ontario has more in common, probably, with northern Quebec, northern Saskatchewan, northern Alberta and all the north regions. There, the commission applies different mathematical formulas. Wherever you live in this great country, you should be treated the same.

Mr. Marc Serré: If I may, I'll add.

Obviously, there is the higher population of seniors, the transportation issues and the Internet issues, as indicated.

The last time northern Ontario lost a seat was in 2004. It was my uncle Ben Serré's riding of Timiskaming—Cochrane that was divided. Federally, there were 10 seats in 2004, and provincially there were 11 seats because they used to match them provincially and federally. Then the Ontario government did a preconsultation—and I'm sure you saw that in your reports and I referenced it in my report—and it added seats so there are 13 provincial seats in northern Ontario. Now we're down to nine.

Why is it that the the federal institution does not have the same representation as we do provincially? There are 13 MPPs and nine MPs, and we're going to get eight the next time. We're asking you to really push back in a united and strong way.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now have a quick couple of minutes for anybody who has outstanding questions.

Go ahead, Ms. Gladu.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thanks so much.

I want to return to the question that noted the commission was given a bunch of information and didn't appear to listen. What new information would you put forward that it should hear?

I'll start with Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré: As indicated earlier, it received submissions from colleges, mayors, institutions and the community, and in 2004 and 2012.... There is new information today that we're struggling to try to bring up. One is this issue: Can you, as PROC, make a recommendation to BOIE to relook at how we fund MP offices?

As I indicated earlier, there is a population of 140,000 or 150,000, so adding a few extra staff members may be helpful to serve your constituents, versus in northern Ontario, where we're adding more money but it's not going to help an MP. We can't service the area and we can't get to MPs.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Go ahead, Mr. Sheehan.

Mr. Terry Sheehan: Thank you very much.

I think the commission answered their own question. In my opening remarks, I stated that they created special circumstances and allowed half of northern Ontario to exceed the 25% variance. They acknowledged the challenges, but in doing that, they made the rest of northern Ontario have those challenges, an excess of those challenges.

I pointed to a MP who said that to drive the Thunder Bay circuit and back would be 1,000 kilometres. Well, by creating the Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma riding, it's 1,300 kilometres. It's flawed. I say to them to apply the special circumstance to all of northern Ontario, not half of it.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Go ahead, Ms. Lapointe.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: I would echo what MP Sheehan said. There was an extraordinary circumstance riding in the northwest that existed already. In the original report of the commission, they did not speak to creating additional ones. In the final report, they created two new extraordinary circumstances, so there are now three such ridings in the northwest. As I said, that created a significant domino effect to the northeast. They should look at the situation as a whole for northern Ontario.

Mr. Terry Sheehan: There's one quick point I want to make. I want to draw to the attention of this committee that all 10 MPs, including the Conservative MPs, have penned a letter expressing their support for keeping the status quo, if you will, with the 10 ridings.

I just wanted to draw that your the attention.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: That's a very good point.

I think I'm going to share the rest of my time with my colleagues.

The Chair: That's so generous.

Go ahead, Mr. Fergus.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to thank all the members who came here. I am very sensitive to their situation. It boggles my mind that the commission wants to reduce the number of ridings in their area, given the size of their ridings.

It is odd, Mr. Angus, I thought one of the ridings adjacent to mine was huge, being larger than Belgium, but it is nothing compared to yours, since you said it was bigger than France.

I have two questions for you.

First, are you unanimous in wanting to return to the status quo?

Second, what is the real impact on the francophone communities in your respective constituencies?

Mrs. Carol Hughes: We are definitely unanimous about the status quo, but we are also open to making some changes.

With respect to your second question, which is about Franco-Ontarians, since Dubreuilville and Wawa would be put in the same riding as Sault Ste. Marie, that would dilute the francophone population. Right now, they are in the same riding as Kapuskasing, Hearst and others. So the change would lead to a reduction in services.

• (1255)

[English]

We know that Sault Ste. Marie was not the friendliest town to francophones at first. There were a lot of challenges there. I just think that, at the end of the day, it's about the dilution of the francophone community.

The question before that was about what is new. The new thing is that we've been provided with different changes from what was originally proposed, so we haven't had an opportunity to consult. First Nations were not consulted on the changes that are going to be impacting one of the ridings in Thunder Bay and causing some of them to be taken away. Again, when I look at Sagamok being split away from Massey and Webbwood, that is problematic. That is very problematic.

That's what I would add at this point.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Serré: I would like to add something about the francophonie.

As you can see from my submission, the Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario submitted recommendations to the commission on September 25, including the recommendation to follow the provincial electoral map, for starters.

It also provided data on the proportion of francophones in each riding. For example, the percentage of francophones in Nickel Belt had been as high as 35%, but under the commission's proposal, it would be reduced to 33%. In Timmins—James Bay, 25% of the population has French as their mother tongue; in Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, the number is 23%; in Sudbury, it is 16%; and in Nipissing—Timiskaming, it is 13%. These are the largest ridings in the region.

Now, there is a proposal to divide francophones even further. The Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario, the Association canadienne-française de l'Ontario du Grand Sudbury and other francophone associations have said that the ridings should be kept as they are. As Mr. Angus said, how can you rebuild the relationship with the communities when they are divided? Now they want to divide minority francophones even more.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I would like to clarify something, Mr. Serré.

In the Hearst and Kapuskasing region, the proportion of the Franco-Ontarian population is 90%, and they are going to lose their representation in Parliament.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: In northern Ontario, we have a vibrant francophone community and it is very important that it be protected.

With respect to my riding, I can tell you that Sudbury is a welcoming community from an immigration perspective. We are one of 14 communities in Canada that facilitate the arrival of francophone immigrants.

It is very important that the changes do not diminish the importance of the francophone community in northern Ontario.

[English]

Mr. Terry Sheehan: I just want to add that my sister was the principal of St. Joseph French Immersion Catholic School, a french immersion school in Wawa, and it makes no sense that we're starting to separate these communities of interest.

A lot of the kids are schoolmates. They go to school together, they play hockey together and they go to church together, but we're separating the francophone communities with these mathematical formulas and this does not make sense.

The Chair: That's excellent.

Go ahead, Madame Gaudreau.

[Translation]

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

I had finished speaking, until I heard the comment that provinces are starting a process and making adjustments based on all the criteria that we know. To me, this is a signal to follow the trend. There are probably good reasons for that.

I understand that we are at the last stage. However, I am hammering home the message that I want to see the recommendations and the documents that you are submitting considered, as a step is clearly missing. You are not the first to tell us this. For several meetings now, we have been told that nothing was said and that we then found ourselves faced with something completely different. There is a little bit missing. We need more information and discussion.

In addition to everything we already have and all the things you've brought up, if you're missing information, there's still time to add it to your submission. You are not alone in this. It can be as much in British Columbia as in Quebec. Something has to happen. Just because the number of ridings has been decided, that does not mean that the status quo should be kept on this. Personally, I still have hope.

You can speak to that.

• (1300)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I would say that now is the opportunity to restore equity in northern Ontario. There will be a domino effect, but it's easier to do it now, before the changes are made. We're talking about one riding in all of Ontario, to preserve the 10 ridings in northern Ontario. It's not just about preserving 10 ridings; it's about representation and the rights of citizens.

I am not saying we should take Brampton, but it is an example of an area of 265 square kilometres where representation is already provided. A citizen can leave their house and walk two blocks to their MP's office. That is not possible in northern Ontario.

I would ask the commission to look at this again, for the sake of northern Ontario.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Ms. Blaney, do you have any quick questions?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I don't know if my connection is working well, Chair. Could you let me know if my sound is okay?

The Chair: Your sound is okay, but your screen is slow.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay.

My last question is just to get advice from these folks about how the commission could work more inclusively with rural communities in terms of consultation.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I've gone through this three times, and it's been traumatic every time. The problem was that in northern Ontario we had to prove to very doubting commissioners that we had a right to representation, so we started with a flawed premise.

In 2010 the decision was that they were just going to rip the agricultural region apart because agriculture didn't matter and they were looking at numbers. There was a huge blowback. We had hundreds and hundreds of letters to say that the Highway 11 agricultural region had to be maintained because it was growing. This is a growing region. They're all connected economically, culturally and politically.

We brought that up, and we assumed in the first round that this region wasn't going to be ripped apart, because they were ripping everything else apart. Then in the second round they ripped the agricultural region in half to make up for their arbitrary thing.

The problem is that we have no ability to come to the table fair and square, because we don't know what the rules of the game are. We know we have to prove...and then they say, "Well, these are the rules." We quote the Supreme Court and we quote the legislation, but we're never given the chance to lay out and discuss what are fair questions. How should ridings be set up? None of our ridings make sense, but we are never at the table; we're always playing defence.

Mr. Marc Serré: Just quickly, the recommendation was to do what the province did in 2012. Why can't the federal government do that?

If you read the report from 2004, it's similar to the report from October 2022. As to representation and what the province did, if we don't do that shortly, it will be exactly as Charlie just said: In the next round there is not going to be representation of the first nations.

Just remember, northern Ontario is not just 90%. There are 110 first nations in northern Ontario. How many were consulted? A handful were, and that's really sad. That's going to be repeated. It has been repeated, and the province took it upon itself to do this three years prior to the redistribution. What people in northern Ontario are really afraid of is that now the province will follow the federal model, which is really worrisome.

The Chair: That's excellent. That brings us to time.

I want to thank you all for being here.

Just for the purpose of our report, we ask six questions. I know it's sometimes challenging to be concise. This is what I would like to hear from each of you quickly: Who are your neighbours? Who does your boundary attach to? Have you consulted them? Do they agree?

I have heard your comments about the status quo and the number of ridings, and you're all in agreement, so it does not need to be repeated.

I am asking whether you have consulted your neighbours and whether they agree with why you're here.

Go ahead, Mr. Angus.

• (1305)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes, I have consulted my neighbours in regions that are much larger than Europe.

Mr. Terry Sheehan: It's the same. I've spoken with the folks in the northwest. Right from the get-go we have been communicating, and I mentioned that there is a letter that emphasizes that.

It just blows me away that for my neighbour, Thunder Bay—Superior North, which is on one side, one house will have the above-25% variance and there will be a special circumstance, yet the neighbour right next door—

The Chair: Mr. Sheehan, I am hearing from you that you have consulted your neighbours and that, yes, they agree.

Mr. Terry Sheehan: Yes.

The Chair: That's excellent.

Mrs. Hughes, go ahead.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I'll just say there is a letter on file, which we had submitted, and it shows that all MPs in northern Ontario were supportive of maintaining the 10 seats in northern Ontario.

The Chair: Mrs. Hughes, my question is in regard to the boundary changes you're proposing. Have you spoken to neighbouring colleagues and do they agree—yes or no?

If you've not spoken to them, that's cool.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: We've spoken. We've met. We didn't just do a letter. We actually met for the initial proposal, and with this proposal we had discussions as well.

The Chair: Monsieur Serré, go ahead.

Mr. Marc Serré: As indicated, we've been meeting on a regular basis on the proposed changes and we are in agreement.

The Chair: Madame Lapointe, go ahead.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: For my specific riding, I don't oppose the changes the commission made. In terms of northern Ontario, we have worked as a group to voice our concerns over the diminishing by one seat.

The Chair: With that, we would like to thank you for your time and attention. If there is anything else you would like to submit, please submit it to the clerk, and we will distribute it among members.

With that, can I let them go?

Mr. Terry Sheehan: Chair, what is the timeline for the submission?

The Chair: Whenever we start looking at the draft report... You need it in the day before. That's how good your answers were.

Mr. Terry Sheehan: Okay, we'll keep an eye on you.

The Chair: Best wishes to you.

Have a great day. Thank you so much.

Go ahead, Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I don't want to keep us for too long.

I know we had a pretty good list of witnesses who were due to come to committee at our last meeting. That meeting was cancelled. From my perspective, it would be really great to get those witnesses rescheduled as soon as possible. I'm eager to ask them some questions.

I wondered whether that was being made a priority in terms of our schedule. Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull. That's noted.

We will try to prioritize having those witnesses come. We have been slotting in other witnesses. We're continuously playing this game of cancelling meetings. We just need to work with their schedules.

We would love to have all witnesses come, so we will work on that. I hope that satisfies your eagerness.

Have a great day. The meeting is adjourned. See you next week.

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