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Wednesday, November 7, 2007

Afternoon Sitting

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THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

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LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
His Honour the Honourable Steven L. Point, OBC

THIRD SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2007

The House met at 1:33 p.m.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Prayers.

Introductions by Members

C. James: It's my pleasure to introduce two very special guests who are joining us today. Bowashgusin DeLorey-Tully is a grade 9 student at Oak Bay high, and she's here today shadowing her mom Anne-Marie DeLorey, who is the director of research for the NDP caucus. Bow has been attending meetings, she's been spending some time in the hallways, and she's getting an idea of the important work being done by MLAs. Bow is a member of the Hesquiaht First Nation, is a cross-country runner and swimmer, and was a very strong member of the baseball team at the annual NDP-press gallery game last spring.

We also have a second grade 9 student who is here with us today. Justine Nakazawa is a student at Oak Bay high as well, and she's shadowing her mom Suzanne Moreau, who is a constituent in Victoria-Beacon Hill. Justine has been spending the day with her mom, who works in the Premier's office. I'm sure her day has been filled with interesting activities as well. I'd like everyone in this House to please make Bow and Justine feel very welcome.

[1335]

Hon. S. Bond: I too would like to reflect that today is Take Our Kids to Work Day. It is an amazing program. It's been a national program of the Learning Partnership since 1994, and more than 1.5 million young Canadians in tens of thousands of workplaces have participated.

While I'm not lucky enough to be shadowed today by my own children, I am delighted to have a student in the gallery who is spending some time in my office and is also shadowing my staff.

Kyle Stamm is a grade 9 student from D.W. Poppy Secondary in Langley. He is job-shadowing. He is one of thousands of grade 9s across this province who today will experience a variety of things at workplaces. Kyle has not had to be in a scrum but has observed a scrum. He has done lots of the preparatory work for some of the meetings we have had today.

He is joined by his father Lloyd Stamm, who works for the Automotive Training Standards Organization and is the president of Skills Canada B.C.

Kyle, we hope that today does not frighten you from considering a future in politics. Thank you for joining our staff today. We appreciate having you here.

D. Cubberley: As mentioned, there are a number of young people in the precincts today who are here to shadow some of us in the work we do.

I know that politicians in the House are used to being job-shadowed, as there is an entire corps of

people whose work is to do entirely that — sometimes at random, sometimes with rather unfortunate results. But this is about learning about what people do in their daily work and about students who are here to gain insight into the world of work.

Here today from Claremont Secondary School, which is up on the ridge in Cordova Bay, is Chase Porter, whom I haven't met but who is the son of a constituent of mine and is a constituent himself. He's a grade 9 student who is here shadowing his dad. Would the House please make him welcome.

Hon. C. Taylor: I'd like to introduce Julie Samson. She recently joined the Treasury Board staff. She's going to be working with ADM Nick Paul. She's here along with a number of members of the Finance Ministry, and they are participating in a parliamentary procedure workshop. I'd like everyone to make them welcome.

C. Trevena: I'd like to introduce to the House a number of people who have been dedicated in their fight to keep open two hospitals, Campbell River Hospital and St. Joe's in Comox.

When the Vancouver Island Health Authority raised the spectre of one hospital for both communities, they came together to fight for keeping and investing in our existing hospitals. The Citizens for Quality Health Care organized a number of public meetings in both communities as well as organizing two substantial petitions. They're hoping for a positive answer for the two hospitals.

In the gallery today are members of the Citizens for Quality Health Care. From Campbell River, there are Joanne Banks, Richard Hagensen, Lois Jarvis and Ed Jarvis; and from the Comox Valley, Barb Biley, Janet Fairbanks and Gwyn Frayne. I hope the House will make them all very welcome.

Hon. T. Christensen: Consistent with the theme of bringing your child to work today, I am very pleased to introduce William Cottrell, a 14-year-old grade 9 student at Oak Bay high school. He is here with his father Tim Cottrell, who is the director of corporate policy and planning with the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

While I'm not fortunate enough to have one of my own children here today, it is worth noting that William shares one very important hobby with my eldest son, and that is that he is a voracious reader. Please help me welcome them both.

R. Austin: Today it's my pleasure to introduce a good friend, Jason Blackstone. He was born and grew up in Terrace and lived there until a few years ago, when he had to move to the lower mainland to find work.

He currently works supporting adults with disabilities to ensure that they can have as regular and normal a life as possible. This is his first time visiting the Legislature, and I'd like the House to join me in making him most welcome.

Hon. O. Ilich: I too have some staff here who work in my ministry, the Ministry of Labour and Citizens'

Services. They're also here attending the parliamentary procedure workshop.

[1340]

They are Nancy Gray, who works at the information security branch, and Clive Brown, who is in the office of the chief information officer. Could the House please make them welcome today.

Hon. R. Thorpe: Today in the gallery attending the parliamentary procedure workshop are two staff from the Ministry of Small Business and Revenue, Tonya Young and Monica Gervais. Would the House please make them welcome.

G. Coons: I'd like to acknowledge in the House today Greg Dow from Save Our Ferries working group. They're planning a coastal tour to advocate for a marine highway system. Please make him welcome.

Hon. I. Chong: I too would like to welcome to the House today a staff person from the Ministry of Community Services attending the parliamentary procedure workshop. Mary Ellen Tonge is from our financial operations. Would the House please make her welcome.

Hon. G. Abbott: There are five members of the Ministry of Health who are here today attending a parliamentary procedure workshop. I know they are looking forward to seeing the civility and decorum that often characterizes this House during introductions and learning from that. [Laughter.]

I'm glad the member for Saanich South, at least, enjoyed that.

They are Erin O'Sullivan from population health and wellness, Tracy Halligan from medical services branch, Kristen Yarker-Edgar from population health and wellness, Linda Carswell from strategic directions and analysis, and Linda Low also from strategic directions and analysis. Would the members of the House please make them welcome.

K. Whittred: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of yourself, I would like to take the opportunity to introduce all the public servants who are seated in the east gallery today, participating in the parliamentary procedure workshop. This workshop offered by the Legislative Assembly provides a first-hand opportunity for the public service to gain a greater understanding of how their day-to-day work affects the work of the Legislature. Would the House please join me in making them welcome.

Hon. P. Bell: It's my pleasure today to introduce to the House two absolutely fantastic employees of the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, who are here on a parliamentary procedure workshop. Would the House please make Vanessa Thompson and Ingrid Strauss very welcome.

Hon. R. Coleman: Also attending the parliamentary procedure workshop are some folks from my ministry: Carrie Daniels from the building, safety and

policy branch; Andrew Hall from the coast forest region; and Dave McBeth from stewardship. Would the House please make them welcome.

Hon. B. Penner: Not to be outdone or completely overlooked, the Ministry of Environment is also participating in the parliamentary workshop today. I'm pleased to announce that Eva Podolski, corporate services division; Alisa Williams with the environmental management branch; Barron Carswell, oceans and marine fisheries branch; Rachel Thomas, office of the deputy minister; and Christina Bell of the strategic policy division are all here at the Legislature with us today.

Hon. S. Bond: I too have a wonderful person from our ministry here, who does a terrific job in the legislation and litigation branch. Please join me in welcoming Mary Shaw to the gallery today.

Hon. K. Krueger: The Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources is also well represented at the parliamentary procedure workshop. I'd like the House to please welcome an employee of the mines and minerals division, Margo Brody.

Hon. C. Richmond: I have three Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance staff attending the workshop today. They are Maria Agius-Aasen, Elaine Cross and Jason Stabler, who along with their colleagues are important players in their endeavours of improving people's lives. I'd like the House to make them very welcome.

[1345]

Hon. M. Coell: I have two colleagues from the Ministry of Advanced Education here for the parliamentary procedure workshop as well. They are Vicki Simmons and Melanie Solterbeck. Would the House please make them welcome.

Mr. Speaker: If you were missed, welcome.

Statements (Standing Order 25B)

CAMPBELL RIVER HOSPITAL

C. Trevena: I stand here to recognize an important occasion, the 50th anniversary of Campbell River Hospital. In 1953 ten people started a petition calling for a new hospital. They managed to get it signed by a large proportion of Campbell River residents, and it was presented to the government. The then Minister of Health agreed on the need for a hospital, and moneys were made available. The power of petitions.

By September 7, 1957, the Campbell River Hospital was officially opened, and a poem dedicated at the time read that it was designed for the present and the future as well. When it opened, the hospital had 56 acute beds, two labour beds, two post-op recovery beds and 14 bassinets. There were 59 staff and six doctors.

Today more than 400 people work at the hospital. There are 80 doctors providing health care to the people of Campbell River and the communities across the north Island. It is our hospital.

According to the Hospital Foundation — a key supporter for the hospital — in an average year the hospital sees more than 30,000 people in emergency; delivers 450 babies; performs 4,200 operations and endoscopies; conducts more than 520,000 lab tests; provides more than 450 chemotherapy treatments; performs 28,000 X-rays, 8,600 ultrasounds and 4,600 mammograms; cares for more than 4,000 in-patients and provides critical care to more than 500 patients in the ICU.

Fifty years on, it needs investment, and no one would deny that. But doctors, nurses, health workers, first nations, seniors and the residents of the city, the islands and the north Island know that Campbell River Hospital is their hospital. The hospital is the hub of a community; it's the heart of a community. Campbell River's hospital has been that for 50 years, and the people of Campbell River, the people of the north Island, hope that it will be so for at least 50 more.

ADOPTION AWARENESS

H. Bloy: November is Adoption Awareness Month in British Columbia. Therefore, I would like to take this time in the House today to recognize, honour and celebrate the many British Columbians who have made adoption an important part of their lives. It is also a time to recommit to those children who still wait for a family and to redouble our efforts on their behalf.

You may be surprised to learn that right now, close to 1,300 children and youth are available for adoption in this province. Some of these children are part of a sibling group who needs to stay together. There are children of all ages who need to be given a chance to experience the support of a loving family. All children need a lifelong commitment from someone who can provide a loving, nurturing, permanent home.

Becoming an adoptive parent is not about perfection, special skills or hidden talents, but rather the desire to build a warm and caring family. I am an adoptive parent, and I can tell you it has been extremely rewarding.

Our family adopted Candace when she was 16 years old. That was due to the tragic loss of both of her parents to cancer. We had known Candace since birth, but this was a family decision we made that we've never regretted. Yes, there have been challenges as with all children, but Candace has brightened all our lives in so many positive ways. We are truly blessed to have Candace as our daughter and sister to Jeremy and Katie.

I encourage anyone interested in adopting and adding to their family to seriously consider it, as it is incredibly rewarding. I want to thank the Adoptive Families Association of British Columbia for all the great work they do. Most of all, I want to thank all those adoptive families in British Columbia for providing nurturing and loving homes for our children.

[1350]

FALLS PREVENTION FOR SENIORS

G. Gentner: This week is the 17th annual National Seniors Safety Week. Falls are the biggest safety issue for British Columbians for a number of reasons. Seniors are more at risk for falling on stairs, and they are more likely to suffer a severe injury as the result of a fall. In addition, falls account for almost two-thirds of injuries for those over the age of 65 that are hospitalized.

Falls are also a leading cause of fatal injury amongst seniors. About one in three British Columbia seniors experiences a fall each year. Given these staggering numbers, it is important for seniors and caregivers to learn how they can prevent these falls from occurring. In fact, seniors 65 and older account for 70 percent of the deaths resulting from stair accidents.

Mr. Speaker, here are very quick tips. Install lights and switches to ensure that all your stairwells are well lit. Make sure there are no uneven surfaces. Correct uneven steps. They are a major hazard.

Stair carpeting can cause slips. Consider removing it or replacing it with well-secured rubber stair treading. Make sure there is a handrail that is well secured on at least one side of the stairwell.

Avoid storing things temporarily on your stairs. Always check the stairs as you walk up or down. The best way is to move slowly. Rushing is a major cause for falls.

Be sure you remove your reading glasses when walking or climbing down stairs. As the member for Kamloops-North Thompson knows, if you use bifocals, adjust your glasses so you can see the stairs clearly.

We on this side do not want any seniors to fall. Keeping within the apolitical nature of statements: if there is to be any fall, let it be the government.

BC150 YEARS RIVERMANIA EVENT

J. Yap: I rise today to talk about a celebration that will involve all British Columbians. Next year, 2008, we will be celebrating 150 years of history, culture and achievement since the Colony of British Columbia was founded in 1858. Events and festivals are planned all year long to commemorate this anniversary, and I encourage everyone to get involved.

My community of Richmond-Steveston is fortunate enough to be involved in one of BC150 Years flagship events, Rivermania. Rivermania will pay homage to the Fraser River — its history, its strength and its peoples.

In 1808 Simon Fraser began his exploration of the mighty river, and 200 years later, voyageur canoes will recreate this epic journey. On August 24, 2008, the flotilla will leave Hubble homestead north of Prince George and wind its way down the 1,400-kilometre river to end its journey in Steveston on September 28.

Along the way, the floating caravan will stop at river communities for local celebrations. There are planned stops in Prince George, Quesnel, Soda Creek, Williams Lake, Lillooet, Lytton, Boston Bar, Yale, Hope, Mission, Harrison Hot Springs, Stó:lô, Abbotsford, Fort Langley, New Westminster, Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows, Surrey, Delta and finally Steveston.

Those communities are by no means the only ones that have benefited from the Fraser River. This province was built on the banks of the Fraser, and the river continues to be a lifeline to so many communities today.

We are fortunate enough to call the most beautiful part of the world home, and that deserves celebrating every day. I hope all British Columbians have the opportunity to get out and celebrate our shared heritage at one of the many events planned next year. You never know, Mr. Speaker. You may see me floating down the river as Simon Fraser did two centuries ago.

WORLD JUNIOR A CHALLENGE

K. Conroy: This week, from November 5 to 11, the West Kootenays are hosting the 2007 World Junior A Challenge. This is an international event sponsored by Hockey Canada, which includes national teams from Canada, the U.S.A., Belarus, Germany and Russia, with teams of young men under 18 years of age with a few 19- and 20-year-olds.

There are two Canadian teams, Canada East and Canada West. Canada West as the defending champions got off to a great start last night, soundly defeating Germany 7 to 2. A total of 13 games will be played this week with eight in Trail and five in Nelson and a pre-tournament exhibition game held in Castlegar. The medal games will be in Trail this weekend, with the gold-medal game this coming Sunday televised on TSN at 7:30 p.m.

Last Sunday young hockey enthusiasts got to experience up close and personal a visit with the Stanley Cup. It was quite thrilling for the future NHL players in our region — and we have produced quite a few — to get their picture taken with the Stanley Cup, as well as skate and get autographs from the visiting players.

It takes hundreds of volunteers to pull off an event of this magnitude. As per usual, the people in the area have stepped up to the plate. The host committee has been incredibly busy planning and organizing, and they have made sure this tournament is a first-class hockey experience for everyone.

[1355]

I want to acknowledge the work of the chair Bruce LeRose and other committee members, including Dean Civitarese, Larry Plotnikoff, Chris Moorhead, Leanne Proulx, Barb Blatchford, Dario Cescon, Jamie Forbes, Gary Bock, Cal Renwick and Bernie Van Hooft.

This year's World Junior A Challenge promises to bring exciting international hockey action to our area. Be sure to tune in on Sunday night to TSN if you want to watch future NHL players in action in the gold-medal game.

POUCE COUPE

B. Lekstrom: It's my pleasure today to stand and recognize a community in the riding of Peace River South that I represent, which has had an extraordinary year, and I stand to speak of the village of Pouce

Coupe. Some call it Pouce Coupé, and we accept both pronunciations in the Peace.

This year was the 75th anniversary celebration of the village of Pouce Coupe. It was officially founded in 1932. The year was really filled with events. There was a homecoming celebration that was hosted between June 29 and July 1 of this year, with a wine and cheese celebration, a street party, a pancake breakfast — really and truly a small-town atmosphere that attracted many, many people back to the community who had been away for quite some time. It attracted, really, the people from the region and right across it.

It culminated in the main event. Each and every year in Pouce Coupe we celebrate Canada Day on July 1 with the great parade for the South Peace area, followed by a barbecue which literally thousands of people attend.

Pouce Coupe is the gateway to British Columbia. Once you come across the Alberta-B.C. border on Highway 2, the first community that you hit is Pouce Coupe. It's about seven miles out of Dawson Creek and the home to many of our friends.

We are a region that, although vast in area... We don't have that many people up there on the east side of the Rocky Mountains. There are about 64,000 of us. Believe it or not, most people do know each other up there. It's a great area.

I want people to recognize that Pouce Coupe — and I'm very proud to be their representative — truly is the showcase for small communities across British Columbia. It shows what the people are about and what small communities can do. It really is heartening to know that we all work together in this province. From the smallest of communities such as Pouce Coupe to the largest like Vancouver and Victoria, we know that we need each other to make a better province, and we continue to do that.

I would like the House today to join me in wishing Pouce Coupe a happy 75th anniversary.

Oral Questions

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO GANG VIOLENCE

C. James: Yesterday the opposition asked the Solicitor General serious questions about gang violence and the opportunity to look at police integration as a potential solution. The Solicitor General responded with attacks, with accusations and with no substance — nothing for the families who are worried about safety in their neighbourhoods. He blatantly dismissed the idea. Then a few hours later the Solicitor General's boss, the Premier, said that we should have that discussion.

So my question is to the Solicitor General. Was he wrong yesterday, or was the Premier wrong?

Hon. J. Les: Just to be clear, we're always open to discussion with anyone on any of these matters. About six weeks ago we had a UBCM convention. I think I met with 45 mayors, many of them from the lower

mainland. Not once did I hear about amalgamation being a top issue of concern with them.

But if that's the discussion they want to launch, we're ready, willing and able to engage in that discussion. I'd like to have that discussion with the mayors, with the police chiefs, with anybody who is interested in furthering the cause of policing.

Mr. Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition has a supplemental.

[1400]

C. James: Well, it's extraordinary. Within 24 hours we've seen this minister flip-flop completely from his comments yesterday. He tells us that he's open to discussions.

Well, let's look at what he said yesterday. The Solicitor General called Chief Heed "out of line" and "inappropriate." How welcoming is that to an open discussion?

The Solicitor General accused the well-respected police chief of raising a red herring and an unwelcome distraction. A few hours later the Premier said that maybe we should look at all options, including that unwelcome distraction.

The Solicitor General was caught flatfooted by the Premier, and now he's spent the day flip-flopping.

Again, to the Solicitor General: will he admit that his incompetence is getting in the way of actually addressing the issue of gang violence?

Hon. J. Les: Well, I think I should review for the benefit of the Leader of the Opposition what we have done in the last number of years to address all kinds of violence.

In the last five years we have added 900 police officers in British Columbia. In the last five years we have achieved 600 police officers working on integrated units, in the lower mainland particularly. In the last two years we have put in place the most seamless information management platform for all police in British Columbia to use. It leads North America in terms of that technology.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. A reminder, Members, that if you're going to make a comment, make it from your own seat, please.

The Leader of the Opposition has a further supplemental.

C. James: Well, the Solicitor General could start by showing some respect to this police chief and police officers by actually listening to what they're having to tell the government about fixing this problem.

The Solicitor General chastised a very well-respected police chief yesterday when he should have been chastising his own boss, who actually said that we should be looking at an integrated force. The government can't get their stories straight.

Mayors, police officers and families know that something different has to be done to address safety on our streets. There aren't enough resources out there,

and we need to have a serious conversation about solutions like looking at an integrated force, which this government is arrogantly dismissing. The only person who doesn't see that is the Solicitor General.

Again, my question is to the minister. It's time to put an end to the flip-flops. It's time to actually stand up for the safety of British Columbians. Will you simply admit that you are not up to this job?

Hon. J. Les: What a preposterous statement by the Leader of the Opposition. All of the extra resources that we have put in place for policing in British Columbia over the last five years — the NDP voted against every one of them.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. J. Les: All of the integrated policing units that we have on the ground in British Columbia today did not happen by accident. They happened because we consulted closely with the police, took their lead and their direction as to how to best organize policing in the province of British Columbia.

L. Krog: This government needs to wake up and pay attention. The status quo isn't working. I pity the Solicitor General.

Mayor Sam Sullivan says that we should start talking seriously about new solutions. The deputy police chief in Vancouver says that we need more resources. Mayor Dianne Watts says that we should look at all options, because criminals don't respect boundaries.

Families are worried about the growing number of murders in their neighbourhoods, and the Solicitor General is happy with the status quo. So my question is to the Attorney General. What's he going to do today to deliver new resources and new solutions to protect families in B.C.'s neighbourhoods?

[1405]

Hon. J. Les: Well, I would assume the member opposite would know that three years ago we made available to municipalities across British Columbia traffic fine revenue; \$58 million dollars is going to municipalities this year.

The member opposite specifically mentioned the city of Vancouver. They are receiving over \$14 million this year in additional revenue. That's just one example. I could also mention, for example, the integrated units — \$58 million that the province is putting into the integrated police units that we have in the province this year. We are backing up all of the initiatives that have been taken by lots of resources to give the police the tools they need to do the job they need to do.

Mr. Speaker: The member has a supplemental.

L. Krog: The Solicitor General likes statistics? Here are some statistics. Statistics Canada 2006: 45 percent of

gang-related killings are solved across the country, 80 percent of non-gang-related murders. In British Columbia it's a pathetic 39 percent of gang-related murders and 68 percent of non-gang-related murders. Another statistic: in two and a half weeks, ten gang-related murders in British Columbia.

It's clear from what we've heard from the Premier and the Solicitor General in the last couple of days that it has never even reached the cabinet table of British Columbia for discussion. It's clear they've never considered this an important enough issue to make it to the cabinet table.

So my question to the Attorney General again today is: when is he going to stand up and admit that the Liberals don't have a plan and put an end to the growing violence in the province of British Columbia?

Hon. J. Les: Well, I could recount again for the member opposite all of the initiatives that we've taken over the last number of years.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. J. Les: Just a few moments ago I reminded members opposite that over the last five years, we've added 900 more officers across the province. I've already told the member opposite that we have 600 officers in British Columbia who are involved in integrated policing units. I've already told the member opposite that we've got \$58 million of traffic fine revenue going to municipalities every year to help them with their resources.

We've been very active on this file. We are providing the police with the resources they need. I'm very confident in their ability to do that job, and I'm actually offended somewhat by the characterization by the member opposite in terms of the work that police do.

M. Farnworth: What the people of British Columbia are offended by is a minister who is taking a status quo, business-as-usual approach. That's what they're offended by. They're offended when a minister stands up and says, "Oh, we have 600 officers doing this," when he fails to say how many of them are involved in integrated traffic. When you're involved in integrated traffic, you're not out solving gangland violence.

My question is to the Premier. The minister has changed his tune since yesterday. He has flip-flopped on whether or not we could look at new ideas. So my question to the Premier is this. Will he tell him to change his tune on the issue of resources — that with a \$4.1 billion surplus in this province, maybe it's time we add additional resources to fight the scourge of gangland violence in British Columbia?

Hon. J. Les: I believe that's the same question that the same member posed yesterday, and the answer is the same today as it was yesterday as well. We have put very significant...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. J. Les: ...additional resources into policing in this province. If the member wishes, I can go through the list again.

We have put lots of additional resources in place. We've got a gang task force. We've got the combined special enforcement unit. We've got the Integrated Gang Task Force, the Integrated Homicide Investigation Team, and these units are all working very closely together.

[1410]

As a matter of fact, they're having a press conference, as we speak, to share with the public the work they're doing in a very united way so that we can get to the bottom of what's happening.

Mr. Speaker: The member has a supplemental.

M. Farnworth: That answer is as pathetic today as it was yesterday. It's as pathetic as when the member for day care said about booster seats: "You voted against the budget."

The fact is that the minister doesn't have a plan. The fact is that the minister is not on top of his file.

My question is to the Premier. There's a gang war going on in this province in the lower mainland. Innocent people are being killed. The public wants action. They want leadership. This minister, this Solicitor General, has failed to provide it. So will he tell the Solicitor General to either get on top of his file or come and pay him a visit in the Premier's office?

Hon. G. Campbell: Mr. Speaker, this is a very serious matter, and it's a matter that requires everyone to work together. It's a matter that requires us to think about not just our police officers in British Columbia but our courts.

It's a matter that requires integrated services and integrated responses. That's why this government has not just put on additional resources, with 900 additional officers. This is a government that has put additional tools in the hands of those officers.

We've put PRIME in the hands of officers. We have the first helicopter that's there to deal with these issues. We have integrated task forces on gangs. We have integrated task forces on homicide. We have a Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit. We have a comprehensive response, and it's a response that requires communities, the province and the federal government to work together.

Our plan is to make sure that the integration we've put together, the resources — the literally tens of millions, hundreds of millions of dollars — we've put into policing are used to secure communities and to make them safer for every single British Columbian regardless of where they're living.

S. Simpson: The Solicitor General and the Premier can spout all of the rhetoric they want in this House. The reality is that in my community — in Vancouver,

in Metro Vancouver — ten people have been murdered in the last two and a half weeks. The people in my community have no confidence that this government is providing the support necessary to local police to get on top of this gang-related violence.

My question is to the Premier. What is he going to do? What is his government going to do to get on top of this, to support these communities and end this violence now?

Hon. G. Campbell: What this government is going to do is continue to work with local police forces, with the RCMP. What this government is going to do is continue to provide integrative tools that people can use so that we deal with this, and what this government is going to do...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. G. Campbell: ...is continue to work with those communities by giving them resources.

The previous government was asked for almost a decade to provide a percentage of traffic fines. We give 100 percent of all traffic fines to local communities.

The fact is that there are 900 additional police officers at work, and this government will continue to work with the policing community, with local communities and with resources to give them the tools to make sure that we have safe and secure communities.

I only hope, Mr. Speaker, that the next time the budget is presented, the opposition provides support to police through the budget, as this government has consistently done.

Mr. Speaker: The member has a supplemental.

[1415]

S. Simpson: All of this bluster about the budget just doesn't cut it when it comes to dealing with this problem. The reality is that if the Premier wants to talk about budgets.... Will he stand up and tell this House and tell British Columbians today that he's prepared to take some of that \$4.1 billion surplus, invest those resources in policing and help solve this problem instead of sitting there and doing nothing?

Hon. G. Campbell: There has never been a question about this side of the House, about the government's intention of investing in policing in British Columbia. The question is: will every one of those members vote for budgeting for policing? Nine hundred new police officers, and the opposition voted against them; 100 percent of all traffic fines to local communities, and the opposition voted against it.

You can count on this, Mr. Speaker. This government is going to continue to work with policing in this province — with police officers, with police forces — to create safe and secure communities throughout British Columbia.

HEALTH MINISTRY CONTRACT WITH JONATHAN BURNS

A. Dix: My question is to the Minister of Health about the e-health scandal in his ministry. Dr. Jonathan Burns was the senior medical consultant in the Ministry of Health for e-health. He received his contract. He billed \$368,000 in fiscal year 2006-2007 — \$538,000 over the 18 months leading up to March 31, 2007. That's \$30,000 a month — not bad for government work.

At the same time, he was substantially billing MSP. At the same time, he was serving as CEO of an e-health company that had contracts with five health authorities.

Can the minister confirm that Dr. Burns's contract was terminated at the same time as Mr. Danderfer's suspension? And can he tell this House what steps he took, because Dr. Burns was reporting to him, to ensure that potential conflicts of interest were avoided with respect to this contract?

Hon. G. Abbott: I can't confirm the suggestions which the member has made. If the issues which the member raises are germane to the current work that is being undertaken by the internal audit division of the comptroller general's office in respect of the activities of Mr. Danderfer as assistant deputy minister in Health, I'm sure they will be assessed and pursued.

If the member has a charge to make, he should make it. I think all members of this House owe it to justice, to public service and to the people of British Columbia to ensure that the review, which is currently underway by the internal audit division of the comptroller general's office, should be allowed to complete and to report out.

Mr. Speaker: Member has a supplemental.

A. Dix: Dr. Burns's contract would make him the highest-paid person in the Ministry of Health. He was reporting to the Minister of Health. The Minister of Health is responsible, here in the Legislature, to respond to questions about that contract. There are very serious allegations of conflict of interest with respect to e-health bidding. There are hundreds of millions of dollars at stake.

My question to the Minister of Health.... He had to know about that contract. He had to know about the circumstances of that contract. He's the Minister of Health.

I would like to know, hon. Speaker, what steps he took to ensure that potential conflicts of interest were avoided. It's a simple question. It has nothing to do with the investigation. We'd like to know the answer, and further, we'd like to know whether the contract has been terminated or not.

Hon. G. Abbott: What I know is that Dr. Burns is an emergency room physician. I also know that Dr. Burns is a specialist in respect of IT matters, electronic health management matters.

[1420]

If the member has a charge to make, I'm glad to hear it. And I'm glad, if he's got a charge to make, to

ask the appropriate authorities to pursue it. But for him to stand up in this House and make allegations, I think, is not constructive. We should look forward to seeing the review completed by the internal audit division and look forward to receiving their advice.

GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION
WITH FIRST NATIONS ON
RELEASE OF PRIVATE LANDS

S. Fraser: Yesterday the Minister of Forests and Range was quoted as saying that he engaged in full consultation with first nations around the forest land giveaways in this province. This minister and this government have absolutely no credibility when it comes to first nations consultations around these land giveaways.

The Kwakiutl, Pacheenaht, Beecher Bay and T'sou-ke First Nations all are contemplating court action against this government's giveaways of Western Forest Products lands. The B.C. Supreme Court found the former Minister of Forests did not engage in meaningful consultation with Hupacasath and the Tseshahat around the Weyerhaeuser giveaways in 2004.

Now the first nations in the Kootenays are informing the opposition that they are getting form letters inviting comments. Now, this is supposed to be a new relationship. First nations are not some distant stakeholder. Has the minister learned nothing? Correspondence is not consultation. How does the minister consider form letter consultation as meaningful consultation?

Hon. R. Coleman: I'll put up our cooperation with first nations in this province against that opposition over there any day.

To the member opposite: the consultation actually starts with written communication, and then it goes from there...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. R. Coleman: ...to back-and-forth communication and meetings, hon. Member, and that's how consultation takes place.

And do you know what? In this province there are over 120 first nations that have forest and range opportunity agreements signed with this government. We are debating the first modern-day urban treaty in British Columbia in this House. We have a first nations forest stewardship council that we work with on all first nations issues on the land.

Frankly, I know the members opposite don't like the fact that some private land was removed from a TFL so that first nations and non-first nations alike can have great opportunities to work in the forests of British Columbia.

FOREST INDUSTRY IN KOOTENAY AREA

B. Simpson: The whole point about removing private lands from tree farm licences with respect to

first nations is that they lose all rights over those private lands. The minister stands here and says that first nations will benefit from the economic opportunities of private lands. Removing them extinguishes their rights. That's what the courts said to the former Minister of Forests, and that's what the court will likely rule when these other cases come before the courts.

But my question to this minister is about the other consultation that he doesn't do. He doesn't consult with the people — sorry, I'm trying to be careful not to tread on territory again — whose actions he hurts. He doesn't consult with the communities whose actions he undermines.

Today Pope and Talbot is in a court in Ontario. Today Interfor closed a mill. Previously Weyerhaeuser closed a mill. We have mills closing in the Kootenays and in the Okanagan on a daily basis.

My question to this minister is this. What immediate steps is this minister taking today to address the collapse of the industry in the Kootenays?

Hon. R. Coleman: I guess what I should do is phone the Federal Reserve in the United States and say: "Would you take the dollar from \$1.10 down to 85 cents, because that actually helps our forest sector in British Columbia?" Maybe I should tell them that they should start building houses again in the United States because the housing market has gone into the tank. Maybe I should ask them to do something about their...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

[1425]

Hon. R. Coleman: ...sub-prime mortgage problem in the United States.

Member, that is just a nonsensical question. What it is, is that we have to build a future for forestry in British Columbia. We're going to cooperate and work with our companies to do that. We're going to do it in such a way that we can be successful. But we don't control those other factors that are actually having dramatic effect on the forest sector in British Columbia. You know that; I know that; any economist knows that. Anybody who knows anything about forestry in British Columbia knows that.

Mr. Speaker: Member has a supplemental.

B. Simpson: I'm glad I got that answer, because if the minister had done his homework, if he had been paying attention to this file, he would have read the presentation to the Finance Committee in Cranbrook by Tembec.

Tembec, like other members of the industry, are saying we have public policy issues that are driving this downturn deeper than it needs to be — public policy issues that this minister fails to address. Tembec said that softwood is in the way. Tembec said that stumpage is in the way. Tembec said that access to public logs by this government is in the way of them staying competitive — actually surviving — through these next two years.

My question to the minister is this. It took him two years to deliver an eight-page piece of fluff that will do nothing for the coast. How long is it going to take him to address those immediate public policy concerns that will help the southern interior survive this downturn?

Hon. R. Coleman: I guess the member opposite doesn't know that the Finance Committee actually prepares a report and delivers it to the Legislature at the end of its consultation. I guess the member opposite hasn't looked at the market pricing system and how it's actually taken stumpage down in each of the last two quarters with regard to what companies pay for the fibre in British Columbia.

I guess the member hasn't looked at the mix of fibre in different areas of the province where you have green and dead in certain areas and a lot more green in others, and how that affects the price of logs because of the value that somebody is prepared to pay for the log to take to their manufacturing facility in a different area of the province.

I'm sorry, hon. Member. I can't bring down the dollar. I can't change housing starts in the United States. What I can do is what I'm doing, and that's working with companies for long-term solutions. Those long-term solutions are being delivered in British Columbia. You don't like it. You don't want to believe in it.

But you can go back to the 1990s and look at the mills you closed and at the bad investments you made in things like Skeena Cellulose and the billion dollars you put on top of this industry with the Forest Practices Code and this backroom deal that you made with Carrier that cost this province hundreds of millions of dollars because you were more interested in fraud than working with the forest companies.

The fact of the matter is that we're going to build a future for forestry in the province of British Columbia.

REVIEWS OF CHILD INJURIES AND DEATHS

N. Simons: This morning the Representative for Children and Youth released her first report on the critical injuries and deaths of children receiving services from the Ministry of Children and Families. She was not able to review the circumstances of children who are receiving services under the program called Child in the Home of a Relative, and that accounts for about 5,000 children.

It's been seven months since the representative has asked for this authority. When will the Attorney General give the independent representative the authority she needs to review critical injuries and deaths of all children so they don't become the new forgotten children?

Hon. T. Christensen: We're well aware of issues around the Child in the Home of a Relative program. It's important to recognize that the program is actually an income assistance program. It is not a child protection program. Having said that, we are working closely — the Minister of Employment and Income Assistance

and I — in terms of reviewing that program to ensure that it is as effective as possible.

[End of question period.]

C. Trevena: I'd like to present a petition, please.

Mr. Speaker: Proceed.

Petitions

C. Trevena: I present a petition with 18,775 signatures from people in the Comox Valley, Campbell River and the north Island calling on the Minister of Health not to give approval to a regional hospital for the north Island but instead to invest in Campbell River Hospital and St. Joseph's Hospital in Comox Valley.

[1430]

Hon. R. Neufeld: I rise to present a petition from the Royal Canadian Legion in Fort St. John, with 47 signatures, opposing the closing of their smoking room.

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: Mr. Speaker, I call third reading of Bill 40, the Tsawwassen First Nation Final Agreement Act.

[1435]

Third Reading of Bills

TSAWWASSEN FIRST NATION FINAL AGREEMENT ACT

Bill 40, Tsawwassen First Nation Final Agreement Act, read a third time and passed on the following division:

YEAS — 63

Falcon	Coell	Ilich
Chong	Christensen	Les
Richmond	Bell	Krueger
Roddick	Hayer	Lee
Nuraney	Whittred	Cantelon
Thorpe	Hagen	Oppal
de Jong	Campbell	Taylor
Bond	Hansen	Abbott
Penner	Neufeld	Coleman
Hogg	Sultan	Bennett
Polak	S. Simpson	Farnworth
James	Kwan	Ralston
B. Simpson	Cubberley	Hammell
Coons	Thorne	Simons
Puchmayr	Routley	Fraser
Hawes	Yap	Bloy
Horgan	Dix	Trevena

Robertson	Karagianis	Krog
Austin	Chudnovsky	Chouhan
Wyse	Macdonald	Conroy
Black	McIntyre	Rustad

NAYS — 4

Jarvis	Lekstrom	Sather
	MacKay	

Hon. M. de Jong: I call second reading debate on Bill 39, Electoral Boundaries Commission Amendment Act, 2007.

Second Reading of Bills

ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES COMMISSION AMENDMENT ACT, 2007

Hon. W. Oppal: I move that Bill 39, Electoral Boundaries Commission Amendment Act, 2007, now be read a second time.

The Electoral Boundaries Commission Amendment Act, 2007, gives effect to the direction provided by the government last month regarding the government's intention to give updated instructions to the current Electoral Boundaries Commission.

The bill responds to the needs of all British Columbians for effective representation in the Legislative Assembly. It ensures that the most geographically isolated regions of our province will not lose representation, while at the same time helping to balance the population disparities that exist between rural and urban areas of British Columbia.

As members will recall, two years ago this House passed amendments to the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act giving the current commission its terms of reference, which included making proposals for between 79 and 85 electoral districts.

I said during the second reading debate that at that time the potential of adding up to six seats to the Legislative Assembly would help the commission take account of population shifts in the province, in particular the growth of urban areas like the lower mainland and southern Vancouver Island, while ensuring that northern representation was not undermined.

The commission, which has undertaken its task with care and diligence, nevertheless believed that the best electoral map it could produce under its current mandate required reducing representations in the north, Cariboo-Thompson and Columbia-Kootenay regions.

The commission's preliminary report, delivered on August 15, 2007, recommends reducing electoral districts in those three regions by one each and adding a total of five new districts in other regions of the province — the Okanagan, Fraser Valley, Surrey, Tri-Cities and Vancouver — for a total of 81 electoral districts in the province.

Hon. Speaker, the response to the commission's report was swift and clear. The citizens in the north, Cariboo-Thompson and Columbia-Kootenay regions

were deeply concerned about the proposed loss of electoral districts. Members on both sides of the House echoed that concern. The overriding issue is one of effective representation. Determining electoral boundaries is a very difficult task in a province that is as large and diverse as British Columbia.

[1440]

The vast majority of population is centred in the lower mainland, southern Vancouver Island and Okanagan areas. That leaves relatively fewer members to represent citizens in rural areas. In particular, it means that rural electoral districts grow increasingly large in area and are challenging for members of this House to represent them effectively and for citizens in those regions to have a meaningful connection with their elected representatives.

To give you an example, the proposed Northland electoral district in the commission's preliminary report would be 255,000 square kilometres. This is an area larger than Great Britain. While the population in this area is small, it is scattered over 25 different population centres, from Atlin in the north to Chetwynd bordering on the Peace River area. Similar difficulties would exist in other proposed districts in these regions.

Urban areas face the opposite challenge. While the geographical areas are small, the populations are large and frequently ethnically and linguistically diverse. The challenge for those of us who have come from urban areas is to be accessible to a large number of constituents who, because they live in a concentrated area, may also have higher expectations than will be readily available to them.

This bill attempts to strike a balance between the needs of the people in rural regions and those in the urban areas, while still giving the commission the independence and flexibility it needs to produce a workable and well-considered electoral map for British Columbia.

To that end, the commission will be required to ensure that there is no reduction in the number of electoral districts in the regions identified in the commission's preliminary report as the North, Cariboo-Thompson and Columbia-Kootenay.

For these three regions, the commission will not be bound by the 25-percent population deviation rule contained in the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act, although it must still consider the principle of representation by population as well as the history, geography and communities of interest that exist in those areas.

The effect of this requirement is that the north will continue to be represented by eight members, the Cariboo-Thompson by five and the Columbia-Kootenay by four.

In determining electoral districts for the rest of the province, the commission will continue to be bound by the rules set out in the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act, including the 25-percent population deviation rule. The commission will be instructed to propose a total of 87 electoral districts for British Columbia.

The addition of three districts in the more populous areas of the province will help balance the population disparities between the urban and rural areas. They will not in themselves provide for voter parity. To achieve that goal would require a massive increase in the size of the Legislative Assembly. However, the

three additional seats will help get us closer to that objective and to that goal.

To give the commission the flexibility it will need to make its recommendations, the commission may adjust the boundaries or regions as it sees fit. The commission's original mandate required it to make recommendations for the single transferable vote system. That will be the subject of a provincewide referendum in May 2009.

The commission will still propose electoral boundaries under STV but in accordance with its new instructions. That is, it will recommend STV districts that provide for a total of 87 members of this assembly with the required number of MLAs in the three regions identified in the bill.

To help the commission complete its mandate, the bill provides for the commission to submit an updated preliminary report by the end of January 2008 and a final report by April 15, 2008. This represents an extension of two months overall from its previous reporting deadlines.

[1445]

The direction provided in this bill has precedence elsewhere in Canada. Saskatchewan's electoral boundaries legislation requires there to be two northern electoral districts above a specified dividing line and 56 districts in the southern portion of that province. Those two northern districts exist regardless of the population disparities that may exist between them and the rest of the province.

In Prince Edward Island the French-speaking community of Evangeline-Miscouche has long been recognized with its own electoral district, even though that requires a larger deviation from the population average.

The fundamental principle that should guide us is effective representation in the Legislative Assembly. The Supreme Court of Canada, in upholding Saskatchewan's electoral boundaries, made it clear that the right to vote guaranteed under section 3 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms should be broadly considered. While relative parity of voting power is the starting point for the electoral map, the right to vote encompasses more than strict numerical equality in electoral districts.

As the chief justice said in that decision: "The concept of absolute voter parity does not accord with the development of the right to vote in the Canadian context and does not permit of sufficient flexibility to meet the practical difficulties inherent in representative government in a country such as Canada. In the end, it is the broader concept of effective representation which best serves the interests of a free and democratic society."

I believe this bill will help the Electoral Boundaries Commission to propose an electoral map for the province that achieves that goal.

B. Ralston: I rise on behalf of the official opposition at second reading to oppose this bill for the following reasons....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Continue, member.

B. Ralston: Firstly, there's the Premier's unprecedented interference with the report of the commission;

secondly, the addition of eight new politicians, which no one asked for; and thirdly, the dilution of rural representation by increasing the size of the Legislature to 87 seats.

[K. Whittred in the chair.]

The preliminary report of the commission was delivered by the commission on August 15 of this year after a very lengthy process, mandated by the act, which stretched over some 18 months.

This is not some simple process. According to the act, it's mandated to take place once every ten years. The commission is established by the legislation. A commissioner is chosen. The Chief Electoral Officer participates, and a third person is appointed after consultation with the Leader of the Opposition.

That process took place, and the commission began its existence. But in order to do the work that's necessary in this kind of a consultation, the commission is required to hire staff — research analysts and communications staff — and to begin a process of public consultation.

In their report of over 500 pages, those consultations are set out. They held a series of public meetings throughout the province over some 12 months — at page 400 of the report, I believe it is, the locations of those meetings are set out — beginning in Victoria and Vancouver and extending to every corner of the province.

[1450]

In addition, there were special sessions convened for the convenience of members of the Legislature, who were invited to make their own submissions, and political parties in addition, of which a number took part.

The B.C. Liberal Party did not take part, and very, very few — there were several — Liberal MLAs took advantage of the opportunity to convey their views to the commission.

By my calculation, some 24 members of the opposition at various venues conveyed their views. I spoke in Vancouver and in Surrey. I think the member for Yale-Lillooet spoke in Williams Lake, Merritt and Vancouver. But for the most part, those are single appearances by MLAs.

What New Democrat MLAs, members of the opposition, advocated before the independent commission chaired by Mr. Justice Cohen was the importance of effective representation and also the importance of rural representation. That message was conveyed and hammered home on behalf of constituents in northern British Columbia, in the Cariboo-Chilcotin, in the Cariboo-Thompson region and in the Kootenays — repeatedly, carefully and with considerable public support.

B.C. Liberal MLAs were, I would say, asleep at the switch. They didn't want to participate in this process, except for a few.

The result of the process after this period of consultation: a 500-page report setting out the history of legislative and electoral redistribution in the province over a number of years, setting out the legislative framework that operates, the considerable legal background....

There have been cases referred to, which I'll refer to as well, including decisions of the Supreme Court of

Canada which consider the Charter content — the content under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms — of the right to vote and how that is to be conveyed in legislation which decides upon electoral boundaries.

It's a considerably sophisticated and protracted enterprise, which availed itself of all the opportunities for public consultation that were required and also a considerable period, understandably, to consider all the submissions that were heard; the results of the new 2006 census, for which the operation of the commission was delayed somewhat in order to have the most up-to-date demographic information available to the commission in order that the boundaries be decided upon the most current demographic information; and in addition, the analysis of the peculiar and varied regions of this province.

It is, I would say, perhaps more complicated, although I wouldn't want to diminish the magnitude of the challenge and say Saskatchewan.... But in British Columbia, given our unique geography, our distinct regions and the dispersed population in this vast province, the task that the Electoral Boundaries Commission undertakes is no easy one.

Bearing all that in mind, on August 15 the commission gave its report. The Attorney General says that reaction to the report was swift and that there were complaints about the diminishment or the reduction of rural representation in three regions of the province.

That result was foreshadowed somewhat by Mr. Justice Wood in his report some ten years ago, who said that without legislative change, he could foresee that in the future — in other words, the present commission — it might be impossible to fulfil the mandate of the commission without reducing a rural representation.

[1455]

Nonetheless, that opportunity to present the legislation in that form was not taken, and the commission, quite properly — following the legislative instructions that it had at the time — proceeded on that basis. But the process was due to embark upon a second round of consultation mandated by the act, with the preliminary report being brought down on August 15, 2007, and the final report due on February 15, 2008.

What the act mandates — indeed, this took place ten years ago under the Wood commission — is that when the preliminary report is tabled, the opportunity is given to the public to view the report and make comments upon that report. That's an important part of the process. In the case of the Wood commission some ten years ago, there were some reactions in some parts of the province to the boundaries that were proposed. In his final report, Mr. Justice Wood and his fellow commissioners did make some revisions.

It's not a given that the report is simply trotted out. It's a serious and earnest consultation on the preliminary report and a second round of consultations. I believe, in the case of the Wood commission ten years ago, there were approximately 25 public hearings or meetings throughout the province in order to gather input on the preliminary report. That led to some considered and thoughtful revisions, resulting in the

final report. Those are the boundaries that the subsequent elections have been fought upon.

This period of secondary consultation, if I can put it that way, or consultation on the preliminary report — from August 15 to February 2008, when the final report was due to be filed — is an important one. What this legislation does, by the direction of the Premier and by the intent and the wording of this legislation, is eliminate that consultation. It simply eliminates it.

A new report is due on January 31, 2008, with a final report to be filed no later than April 15, 2008. There's an escape clause in the legislation which would give the Legislature the opportunity to add some more time, should the commission feel unable to complete its deliberations within the time that's suggested or mandated there.

The opportunity for a public consultation at that secondary level will be eliminated. One sees that in the legislation there's some opportunity for consultation after January 31, 2008, but again, it's a very brief period of time.

This process, this change, was precipitated by the very unusual and dramatic action by the Premier of writing a letter, dated September 12, 2007, to the Speaker of the House, advising the Speaker of the province's intention "to introduce legislative amendments to the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act, in the upcoming fall sitting of the Legislature. I ask you to share this with the Electoral Boundaries Commission." There's an attached news release. It goes on to set out a very similar rationale to what we've heard here today.

As to what subsequent exchange took place between the commission and the Speaker, it's not clear. None of that is public. I'm not sure that there's any requirement that it be, but certainly, one can well expect that the commission and the commissioners were taken somewhat by surprise by this dramatic intervention into the legislative process and the timetable that they had been working on for nearly two years.

Why did the Premier intervene? He says that it's to protect rural representation.

[1500]

We don't disagree with that, but we become very suspicious when the number of seats is set arbitrarily at a fixed number of 87. It's possible to bring back those three seats to the regions of the province where seats were taken away, without increasing the number of seats to 87.

There's no public cry for 87 seats. The current legislation gives the commission — not the Legislature, not the Premier — the discretion as to how many seats it chose to add, from zero to five. The commission chose, in its exercise of its independent discretion — to draw a map that resulted in an increase of two seats. There's no reason, no call and nothing that was said in any of the public process where anyone....

I defy the government to point to a single person anywhere who is asking that the Legislature be expanded to 87 seats, and I will be addressing that in my remarks somewhat later. In fact, there are, not surprisingly, a lot of contrary views that there's no necessity to expand the Legislature to 87 seats.

One wonders about the motives of the Premier. Rather than give the commission a judicially exercised and independent discretion, the Premier has chosen, through his direction in this legislation, to fix the number of seats — in other words, to remove the discretion from the commission as to how many seats they can create.

They could, in the previous legislation, add no seats if they thought it appropriate or redraw the boundaries. Indeed, there were proposals that came forward to the commission saying: "Look, we don't need more legislators; we don't need more politicians. Let's keep the number of seats at 79 and adjust the boundaries accordingly."

There were other submissions that said we needed to add some to accommodate the obligation of effective representation, to make room for rural representation and to recognize the changing demography and the growth beyond the average in some areas of the province. There were submissions that said that. But that was a discretion that was left to the commission in the performance of their very difficult duties, to give them some flexibility in accommodating all those competing interests.

What this interference, this mandate, this direction to the commission says is: "There shall be 87 seats. You have no choice. No matter what you think, no matter what your considered opinion, no matter what you've heard from the public, no matter what people say anywhere throughout the province, there are going to be 87 seats. There is going to be an increase of eight seats, eight new politicians."

I don't hear the band striking up to play at this point when the announcement of eight new politicians comes forward. Indeed, perhaps unfortunately, the public is deeply cynical about that kind of move by the Premier. One can well imagine that there has been some calculation somewhere on the government side of why 87 seats favour the government and not the opposition. I'm virtually certain that's the case, although I'm sure there will be no speeches from the other side to confirm that suspicion of mine.

There must be a reason. No rationale has been advanced so far, or a very flimsy rationale by the Attorney General, if I may say so with respect, that really doesn't address that issue. Why 87? Why not 85? Why not 83? Why not 79? Why not just stay with the 79 that we have? Where is the demand for another eight seats?

[1505]

What that does to rural representation.... I mean, it's obvious and simple mathematics. If you expand the number of members of the Legislature and hold rural representation constant, the force of the numerical effect of rural representation is diluted. It makes rural representation less strong numerically within the Legislature and, therefore, members of rural constituencies and their constituents less able to influence the process here in the Legislature in the formation of legislation and policy in the ten years to come.

One has to wonder why. I doubt that we will hear from the Premier on this, and I doubt that we will hear a convincing explanation from the Attorney General as

to why that number of 87 was chosen. It's certainly nothing that came out of the public consultation — any of the written submissions, any of the public comment on this issue. There were some members of the Legislature who arose from their slumbers after the report was tabled on August 15, 2007, but certainly those submissions were not made prior to then by anyone that I'm aware of.

When we come to consider the history and the importance of the enterprise that we're involved in here, we have to look back. The commission has very conveniently, in its report, set out some of the history of the previous commissions. I think it's useful to set in context why this legislation is important, because it wasn't always so. It wasn't always so that an independent commission — one independent from real political interference or allegations of political interference — existed here in this province.

The commission refers in its report to what was called the Fisher commission chaired by the late Judge Thomas Fisher, who was given a mandate in 1987 to conduct an inquiry into the composition of electoral districts. The issue at that time was dual-member ridings, where two members represented a single riding. That was regarded as an archaic practice and not consistent with modern democracy certainly in the single-member representation universe, although STV has a different take on that.

In September 1987 Judge Fisher's terms of reference were expanded. He was mandated to recommend the appropriate number of electoral districts, each returning one Member of the Legislative Assembly, and to establish, including boundaries, the electoral districts. He decided at that point to increase the number of MLAs to 75, and he adopted what was then and what has become the judicial standard of not permitting a deviation, except in very special circumstances, of more than 25 percent from the average population.

In order to calculate the average population — I think it's relatively straightforward — you take the population of the province and divide it by the number of constituencies, and you come out with a number. You are permitted by court interpretation in pursuit of effective representation to have a seat that has either up to 25 percent more people in that constituency or 25 percent less, unless there are very special circumstances. Those have been defined judicially, and I'll talk about those a little bit later.

The Attorney General has said here that the three regions we're speaking of will not be bound by the 25-percent rule, which is certainly not consistent with the jurisprudence, unless there is supporting language in the legislation and a supporting special direction, I would say, to the commission that's being asked to draw those boundaries.

[1510]

Certainly in the Saskatchewan case, which I'll refer to in more detail, the commission drew an electoral map, which in the northern half of the province effectively had only two seats, recognizing the sparse population. The vast reach of the geography of northern

Saskatchewan permitted a deviation from the mean — the average number of people in the constituency — to nearly 50 percent below. That was permitted and upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada.

There were very special considerations required because the basic principle is not... In Canada, although it's not one person, one vote, it's the duty of effective representation, which involves balancing a number of considerations, but certainly striving for voter parity weighted against the demands of geography, region and special circumstances including the remoteness of the communities that the constituency seeks to encompass.

Judge Fisher was the first commission — and I would say the first modern commission — in that sense to use that basic principle to establish single-member ridings throughout the province that fell within that band of deviation — no more than 25 percent above and no more than 25 percent below.

This particular principle was enshrined in legislation, and the commission reports in its report on page 29 about taking Judge Fisher's very forward-looking report and incorporating that into a new statute in 1984, which is essentially unchanged today. It's set out in principle 9.1, and I'm going to read:

"...that the principle of representation by population be achieved, recognizing the imperatives imposed by geographical and demographic realities, the legacy of our history and the need to balance the community interests of the people of British Columbia; to achieve that principle, the commission be permitted to deviate from a common statistical provincial electoral quota by no more than 25 percent, plus or minus; the commission is permitted to exceed the 25 percent deviation principle where it considers that very special circumstances exist."

There were some very glaring anomalies in the electoral map that Judge Fisher was called upon to correct and indeed did correct, which were enshrined in that particular piece of legislation. The act was modified, and it was very clear that those principles were upheld and indeed adopted and considered throughout the country in subsequent court cases.

The commission prior to this one, since the legislation requires this endeavour to be undertaken every ten years, was the Wood commission, who reported out in 1999. Mr. Justice Wood — formerly of the Court of Appeal, now sitting as a Provincial Court judge in Duncan, I believe — conducted the endeavour with Reverend Katherine Hough and Robert Patterson, who was the Chief Electoral Officer at that time.

There were some changes in the province, understandably, in that time, and he was called upon to deal with the increasing population of 29 percent over the preceding ten years, primarily in the Okanagan, the Fraser Valley and the east coast of Vancouver Island.

He set out a series of what he called goals in the final report, which he recommended to subsequent commissions as principles that should be followed. I want to set them forth here in this particular speech, simply because I think they're worthy of consideration and are important in setting the context for the kind of unprecedented step that the Premier is taking in this legislation:

[1515]

"(1) Preserve regional representation as far as possible. The commission wanted to ensure that its recommendations did not lead to the loss of an elected representative for any region of the province.

(2) Take historic and geographic considerations into account as much as possible.

(3) Try to minimize change to electoral boundaries wherever possible.

(4) Try to keep the deviations from the electoral quota of electoral districts within a region to a similar range...."

So one would not want to have a seat of 25,000 people next to a seat of 50,000 people next to a seat of 25,000 people on the other side. In other words, have some rough parity within a region.

"...(6) Recommend, wherever possible, electoral boundaries which align with municipal boundaries.

(7) Propose, wherever possible, electoral districts with populations that are likely to remain within the statutory limit of a 25 percent deviation from the electoral quota until the next boundary review.

(8) Correct anomalies created by present boundaries wherever possible.

(9) Consider the impact of the proposed electoral boundaries on the affiliations of first nations in the province — to propose boundaries which avoid dividing the populated reserves of any band between more than one electoral district."

In the result, that commission proposed the present system of 79 electoral districts with some which deviated and required very special circumstances to justify. It is significant that this commission selected from Mr. Justice Wood's report the following warning, and this was obviously apparent to the legislative drafters when they drafted the legislation that came forward to set this enterprise into operation some 18 months or two years ago:

"We feel constrained to note that in the absence of some statutory solutions similar to that in place in Saskatchewan, by which the electoral representation of rural British Columbia can be guaranteed at its present level, the next commission may well find it impossible under the current legislative framework to avoid recommending a reduction in the number of electoral districts in the rural areas of the province."

In 1999 the Legislative Assembly adopted Mr. Justice Wood's report without change. But that is a significant warning and a significant caution that one can only presume the Attorney General, his staff and those drafting the legislation, which set this commission out on its mandate, were well aware of. That was the considered opinion of Mr. Justice Wood and contained in his report, which warned that without that...

I believe I'm the designated speaker, Madam Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Member. Continue.

B. Ralston: Thank you. I'm only just getting warmed up.

It really is a bit hard to swallow, for the government to come back and say, "Well, we were caught by surprise by what this commission did. We didn't know this was going to happen. We thought they weren't going to take away any rural representation," when that risk, certainly that risk — not the certainty,

because they are an independent body; they operate separately from government, presided over by Mr. Justice Cohen.... But certainly that was set out in the previous report by Mr. Justice Wood, which was part of the legislative background to this enterprise setting out into the field.

So I would say that that possibility, that risk of a reduction in rural representation was present when this commission went out in the field. Indeed, that's what they said in their report. In the absence of specific legislative direction to the contrary, they felt themselves obliged to reduce rural representation in the way they did and to add the five seats in the urban and suburban areas that they did.

Certainly, when we come to consider the legal framework — and the Attorney General has referred to it — these considerations were looked at. This is part of the legal background. Again, this is set out in considerable detail in the report, but I will only touch upon it relatively briefly.

[1520]

In the Saskatchewan court challenge, that was a decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in 1991. What happened there in the redistribution was that the Legislature drew boundaries, which in the southern part of the province were considered by some to be somewhat unfair, but in the northern part of the province had two seats only, which were substantially below the 25-percent deviation.

What the court was called upon to do there — and this really is the most important legal backdrop to the considerations of the commission — was look at the validity of the redistribution that the parallel body in Saskatchewan undertook, to examine the content of the right to vote and to consider what effective representation really meant.

This is always a lurking question in any redistribution in the present system. The Attorney General and the government have to make sure that the legal boundaries and the jurisprudence are respected. Otherwise, the whole process or at least the result is open to a court challenge on the basis that it violates those principles. Again, that's part of the delicate balancing act that the commission must perform in carrying out its legislative mandate and drawing the boundaries as it sees fit.

It's noteworthy that the purpose of the right to vote, which is enshrined in section 3 of the Charter, is not equality of voting power per se, but the right to effective representation. The right to vote comprises many factors, of which equity is but one. The court goes on to say that it doesn't guarantee equality of voting power.

What the court then goes on to say is that relative parity of voting power is a prime condition of effective representation. The court, in considering the questions that it did, stated in broad terms that deviation from absolute voter parity may be justified on the grounds of practical impossibility or the provision of more effective representation.

The commission is entitled to consider factors like geography, community history and community interests, and minority representation may be taken into account to ensure that legislative assemblies effectively

represent the diversity of our social mosaic. Beyond that, dilution of one citizen's vote as compared with another should not be countenanced.

To return to my theme at the outset, the official opposition and I are concerned that the power by the fixing of the number of seats at 87, without giving any discretion to the commission, effectively dilutes rural representation in a way that certainly the jurisprudence does not support. I will look forward to whatever assurance, if there is any, the Attorney General can provide on this point. But in my view, that's a real concern about the manner in which this unprecedented direction from the Premier to the commission through this legislation has been carried out.

Departures from this ideal of effective representation may be found to violate section 3 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. So the court did find in the Saskatchewan case that in general, variations between boundaries in the southern part of the province appeared to be justifiable on the basis of factors such as geography, community interest and population growth patterns. The northern boundaries were appropriate, given the sparse population and the difficulty of communication in the area.

[1525]

So in the result, the distribution was not overturned, but the principles that the court set out were significant. Given those principles, one has to be very cautious when one proceeds beyond the 25-percent deviation rule. Whether that has been done sufficiently in this legislation, I suppose time will tell.

I would like to look at the importance of consultation in establishing those boundaries. I mentioned at the outset that there was important consultation set out in the report. I want to record that in these remarks just so people are aware of the consultation process that took place.

I'm looking at the report on page 16. "We spent 12 weeks between September and November 2006 travelling to 30 communities across the province."

In addition: "The commissioners met regularly between the consultation sessions to ensure all three of us were aware of the views expressed at each of the public consultation sessions. We also held two sessions — September 13 and 28 — focusing on the concerns of MLAs and one session — September 14, 2006 — devoted to political parties' issues, which all three commissioners attended."

They did their best, they said, to choose locations where most people could drive to within 90 minutes. In the north they met in Masset, Prince Rupert, Terrace, Smithers, Prince George, Dawson Creek and Fort Nelson; in Cariboo-Thompson — Williams Lake, Kamloops and Merritt; in Columbia-Kootenay — Cranbrook and Nelson; in Okanagan — Kelowna and Penticton; in Fraser Valley — Maple Ridge, Langley and Chilliwack; in Tri-Cities — Coquitlam; in Surrey — city of Surrey; in Richmond-Delta — Richmond; in Burnaby-New Westminster — New Westminster; in Vancouver — downtown and Vancouver-West Broadway; in the North Shore — North Vancouver; in Vancouver Island — Sechelt, Port Hardy, Campbell River, Courtenay, Port Alberni, Nanaimo and Victoria.

There is a listing of all those who participated, and it's a number of pages.

I recite that to emphasize the point that the public consultation process that will now take place, given the new instructions that have been given after this unprecedented intervention and interference by the Premier, will not take place.

There may be an opportunity, after the commission comes back with its new preliminary report on January 31, to take some public consultation prior to filing a final report on April 15, 2008. But certainly the commission will not have the luxury — and, one might argue, the necessary time — to conduct the kind of full consultation that one would think necessary given that they are obliged to reconsider all the work they have done in preparing the preliminary report — which was tabled, some 500 pages' worth, on August 15 of this year.

Among those who attended, as I've said, were a number of New Democrat MLAs at various locations both within their own communities and during the public sessions — the special ones in Victoria and Vancouver. Liberal MLAs, other than those very few who chose to participate, could have reasonably participated in this, but chose not to.

There's no doubt that this is an important and lengthy process. Given the outburst — or, let's say, strong feelings — that the report seemed to have evoked in some Liberal MLAs, it's surprising that they did not participate.

[1530]

Some of the most vehement denunciations of the report were by those MLAs who, according to the records of the commission, chose not to participate at all, and that's to be regretted.

As I've said, there were some Liberal MLAs who participated: the member for Peace River South, the Speaker perhaps in pursuit of his duties as a Speaker of the House, the member for West Vancouver–Capilano and the member for Bulkley Valley–Stikine. One wouldn't want to speculate on the motives of any member for participating, but doubtlessly, those members had some concern about the effect that it might have upon their own ridings.

As I've said, my calculation of the number of New Democrat MLAs who participated is 24, although there may be some double-counting in the sense of the member for Yale–Lillooet having participated in more than one venue and myself having participated in more than one venue.

There was a concerted effort by many MLAs on this side to advocate for their communities with an appreciation of the importance of this process — bearing in mind the principles that the act sets out — and to talk about the changes in their community, about where electoral boundaries might be more effectively drawn and how they might be better able to represent their constituents here in Victoria and in the public politics of the province generally.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

Certainly, there was a concerted effort by the official opposition to take part in this process seriously, meaningfully and on many occasions throughout the

province and in particular — and I want to stress this again — to advocate and impress upon the commission the importance of rural representation.

That view did not prevail to the full extent, and the report was disappointing in the result that it had upon rural representation in three regions of the province. But the solution that's proposed here to fix the number of seats at 87, to add eight seats to the present 79, is not a solution that anyone supports in the province. I defy the members of the government side to point to a single submission that was tabled in any of these processes, a single editorial or a single commentator who's called for 87 seats in the Legislature.

Indeed, the Premier himself was far more certain of the need to reduce the number of seats rather than add the number of seats back when he was Leader of the Opposition. He campaigned in 1996 on reducing the number of MLAs to fewer than 60.

I've got a couple of quotes here that I think are important just to contrast the position that the Premier takes now with the position he took when he was Leader of the Opposition. I'm going to begin with a quote. This is April 26, 1995: "Tonight I want to be specific and leave no doubt about the magnitude of the changes that we believe are necessary. Let me outline some of the specifics for you. Number 9 will cut the number of MLAs and will eliminate the gold-plated MLA pension."

Well, that was the leaders' dinner on April 26, 1995. I'll leave aside the reference to the pension. Obviously, that's the subject of a different debate. Clearly, the Premier has changed his mind on that as well.

That's a very emphatic statement, and he goes on to say in various other venues: "It's time for politicians to lead by example. I am committed to reducing the number of MLAs and eliminating gold-plated pensions." That's in the *Parksville-Qualicum News*, September 14, 1995.

At the B.C. Liberal Party convention in Vancouver on November 18, 1995: "We will reduce the size of Legislature from 75 to between 50 and 60. People want fewer politicians, not more." Those were the words of the Premier when he was Leader of the Opposition. Obviously, he has clearly changed his mind. The question is why.

[1535]

Is there a public demand for more politicians? Are there people out there lobbying any member of this Legislature to say that we need more politicians, that we need to increase the size of the Legislature to 87? I dare say there are not.

If I might continue in quoting the apparent former views of the Premier: "I have yet to have any British Columbian tell me the answer to our problem is more politicians." That's the Premier in the *Vancouver Sun* on November 20, 1995. I want to repeat that. This is a piece of legislation that does exactly that.

It takes away from the Boundaries Commission the discretion that it might have to increase the number if it's absolutely necessary to balance all the different legal interests that are at play in setting up a system of representation in the province. It takes it away. It just arbitrarily fixes it at 87. We're going to have eight more politicians in this place.

I repeat the words of the Premier: "I have yet to have any British Columbian tell me the answer to our problem is more politicians." What's changed? Why did the Premier have this change of heart, apparently? By what process was it decided that the answer to the question here is to increase the number of seats and fix it at 87 — eight more seats?

I'm going to continue, if I might. I have one further quotation from the Premier, a letter to the editor that he wrote in 1996:

"The NDP tried to create fear among Alberni residents that the B.C. Liberal plan to reduce the number of MLAs in Victoria would mean a loss of representation in Victoria. Our proposal to reduce the number of MLAs from 75 to 60 is one piece of a plan for smaller and more effective government that works better for all British Columbians. It goes hand in hand with the B.C. Liberal Community Charter, which will give more resources and more freedoms to local government so they can make their own decisions."

That's a letter to the editor in *Alberni Valley Times*, March 21, 1996. So 75 to 60 MLAs is certainly a marked difference between the legislation that's before us here today that we're debating — an increase of eight politicians to 87. It's not at all clear why the Premier has taken this position.

What is it about 87 that satisfies the Premier on this issue? Why has 87 been chosen when back in 1996 it was 60? We were talking about reducing the size of government and reducing the number of MLAs. I haven't heard anyone say that more politicians are the answer to any problems that we face here in British Columbia. Why is that suddenly the answer?

I think it's clear that there is certainly a suspicion as to what the answer to that question is. There are a number of commentators who have talked about this issue and offered an interpretation of what's going on here.

[1540]

The new MLAs will likely.... I'm quoting from one of the political commentators in the press gallery: "The Premier announced the new MLAs will represent growing regions of the province. Based on that census data, it likely means Greater Vancouver, the Fraser Valley and the Okanagan will get MLAs. What a coincidence that these areas are generally hotbeds of Liberal Party support. It looks to me like..." — and he refers to the Premier by his last name — "...is securing himself a three-peat in the Premier's office. The Liberals would never admit such a thing. Of course..." — he refers to the Premier by his last name — "...says: 'All this is about is protecting rural voters.'"

There's a suspicion out there by experienced political observers that this is not about protecting rural representation. And indeed, it isn't, because the effect of adding and fixing the number of seats at 87 is to dilute rural representation. According to this political observer, what this is about is trying to secure another legislative majority for the government side.

That's the reason why the report of the independent commission resulted in such consternation. The result, aside from the reduction of the three rural members, was generally the kind of job that you'd expect an

independent commission to do — a relatively fair result which took from each side some of their cherished boundaries and drew up a map that, other than reducing the three rural seats, was broadly fair and accommodated all the relative legal interests, representation of communities and geographic realities of British Columbia.

This piece of legislation, in the view of this political observer, is designed to attempt to influence, by the drawing of the lines and a directed drawing.... It's not a direct interference in that sense. It's directing and telling the commission what it has to do. But by choosing that number, in the view of this political observer, the odds favour the government side rather than the opposition.

This observer, Mr. Smyth, goes on: "By the way, the Legislature is bursting at the seams with 79 MLAs as it is. Expanding it to 87 will probably force hugely expensive renovations to the historic building. It's more of your hard-earned tax dollars down the drain." He refers to the Premier by his last name, and he calls it "one of his loopy ideas ever." Granted, editorialists and opinion writers try to write in an engaging and very direct manner, but it's not often that one of the ideas of the Premier is referred to as "one of his loopy ideas ever."

The editorial board of the *Times Colonist* gives a thumbs-down to the Premier for undercutting the electoral boundaries commission with his decision to boost the province's number of MLAs by eight. That's a lot of offices, salaries and pensions to add to the tax burden of ordinary British Columbians. Again, who asked for more MLAs and the extra cost that's required?

One is reminded once again of the words of the Premier back when he was Leader of the Opposition: "I have yet to have any British Columbian tell me that the answer to our problem is more politicians."

Maybe the question is different. Maybe the Premier is hearing other advice. But I suspect the interpretation that's put forward by veteran political observers is the accurate one — that the Premier is firmly of the view that this will give him an electoral advantage.

That's why he's fixing the number, taking away that discretion from the commission to balance all the interests and to say, as the previous act did, that you can go from zero to five. In other words, you don't have to add any MLAs if the commission thinks it can accommodate all the interests in an electoral map in single-member representation. Or if you need to add more, you have the discretion to add up to five.

Certainly, the commission, in the result, came up with a map that had 81 MLAs — a long way from 87, obviously — six fewer MLAs and six fewer, I would say, uncalled-for-by-the-public representatives here in the Legislature.

[1545]

Another editorial comment, from Mr. Paul Willcocks, who says: "Remember, commissioners only proposed adding five new seats to urban areas, so even if instructions are to protect the three rural seats that faced elimination, the Legislature would only need to go to 84 members." I think that's an astute observation, because what he says is that even if you feel you have

to follow the work that has already been done, the Legislature would only need to go to 84 members.

What is the reason for taking it to 87? Why take away the discretion from the independent commission? The learned judge of the Supreme Court, the Chief Electoral Officer, distinguished person Mr. Ladyman, who was on the commission, agreed to by both sides to participate in this process....

Why take away their discretion? Is there some distrust of the commission? Why? What's the motivation for that? Why fix the number at 87? It's not an answer to a public outcry for more politicians — certainly not at all.

The more one thinks about it, the more one looks at it, the answer becomes clear. The Premier has a suspicion and a calculation that's been made by someone somewhere that forcing the commission to create 87 seats will work to his electoral advantage. That's really what it's all about.

It's not about balancing all the interests of rural representation, of urban representation, of geography and community. It's about fixing the number at a number which the Premier thinks will deliver the best electoral result, not for British Columbians but for his party. That's what it's all about, and that's why this legislation fixes the number at 87.

This is, again, a view that's not simply taken by members of the opposition. I'll quote another political observer and veteran columnist, Mr. Palmer. "Had the commission taken the option of adding six seats, it might have provided the government with more opportunities, because many of the fastest-growing areas are represented by Liberals." The sense among those seasoned political observers — the considered opinion, the public opinion — is that the number has been fixed at 87 to benefit the Liberals and effectively dilute rural representation.

I want to begin to close my remarks by being clear about the position of the opposition. We oppose this legislation for the reasons I've set out. At committee stage we will propose amendments that restore to the commission its discretion to set the number of seats between an additional zero to five seats. We will be bringing forward that amendment to restore because we have confidence in the independent commission.

Even if, by this legislation, the government has indicated that they don't have confidence in the commission to do that job, that they have to be told to fix the number of seats at 87.... The government doesn't have confidence in giving the commission that mandate.

They're being told to make the map with 87 seats and are not being given any other alternatives, and that's contrary to the mandate of previous commissions in this province. It's contrary, I think, to the practice across the country, because in order to do the job properly, independently, thoughtfully, conscientiously and, above all, fairly, the commission needs that discretion.

[1550]

This piece of legislation removes that discretion from the commission and fixes the number at 87, an uncalled-for addition of eight legislators. No one out

there is asking for more politicians, and certainly not to increase the size of the Legislature, at great cost, to 87 seats. No one is asking for that. The government knows that. They know that full well. The Premier, indeed, back when he was Leader of the Opposition, understood that very clearly and at that time wanted to reduce the number of seats, never mind maintain the status quo. He wanted to reduce the number of seats.

It's clear that the government doesn't really believe what they're saying. They don't have confidence in what they're saying. They regard this as a device to better what they regard as their electoral chances, rather than engaging in giving the discretion to the independent commission to do its work unfettered and unchained by requiring a fixed number of seats.

In conclusion, I would say that the opposition opposes this legislation. We oppose the Premier's interference with the work of the commission and the fixing of the number of seats at 87. We oppose the addition of eight new politicians, and we oppose the dilution of rural representation. With that, I'll take my place.

B. Lekstrom: It's my pleasure to take my position here in the Legislature today in full support of Bill 39. When this issue first came up and the Boundaries Commission had gone out and completed their work and put their preliminary report forward, I think without question — certainly in the riding I represent and virtually anywhere I went — people were, I guess, shocked, to be honest with you, at what was brought forward. That included people in the lower mainland.

What they were shocked about was not questioning the quality of work that the commissioners had done or their commitment to doing the job they were asked to do. It was the simple fact that a report could come forward that actually put forward less rural and northern representation in this province. That, to me, is astounding.

When it became evident that it was a major issue for British Columbians, unlike what the opposition has tried to portray, the Premier made a decision that we were going to address this in a way.... It is certainly not his decision. I think everybody in this room should understand the parliamentary procedure. A bill is before this House. It isn't one person's bill. We're all going to vote on it. I would hazard a guess that this bill will pass, but I'll wait for that vote.

When I looked at this bill, it was one that did not smack of politics to me. It seemed that everybody, and that's why I'm somewhat astounded, would go: "Good, we're going to maintain rural and northern representation." We're certainly going to continue the tradition in some of the fastest-growing areas of this province, Surrey being one of them — and the member for Surrey-Whalley spoke before that — which is representation by population.

In areas like the northeast part of our province, where we have 64,000 people total, it is far too big an area, I think, to be effectively represented by one MLA. We have in the existing legislation the ability to recognize that. But unfortunately, for whatever reason, the commission in their wisdom — not talking about the

northeast but northern and rural ridings — decided that they would diminish representation of northern and rural B.C. under the existing legislation and enhance the representation of faster-growing areas.

I have nothing against the ability to add MLAs in an area such as Surrey-Whalley, which I believe right now is probably one of the fastest-growing, if not the fastest-growing, area in not only our province but the country. If more representation is needed to give the people that are moving there and live there the representation that they need, then so be it. That's the democracy we live in.

The member for Surrey-Whalley talked about a dilution of rural representation, and he went on — and I'm going to clear this up — to talk about simple mathematics. Well, I'm going to talk about the old piece of legislation that we operated under, which the commission based their preliminary report on.

[1555]

They could have gone up to a total of 85 MLAs under that legislation. They could have. They chose, under that legislation, in their preliminary report, to dilute rural and northern representation by three MLAs — something that, I'll tell you, I will fundamentally oppose whether it's today or 50 years from today. But the reality is that if you took....

An Hon. Member: And just as vigorously then as now.

B. Lekstrom: Yes, I will.

I want the simple math part to come out here, and I hope the people at home who are listening will follow this. The reality is that you have 79 MLAs now, and you can go to 85 under the old legislation — or existing, because we have not voted on this. The recommendation was to remove three northern and rural representatives. That's what the recommendation was.

Had they gone to the full maximum, to 85, if you want to look at that, the dilution factor under the existing legislation would be nine. The dilution factor under the new bill that guarantees northern and rural representation is eight. It is less, even with the addition of the seats in Surrey-Whalley, if that's where they end up — or if they end up on the Island or in the interior, wherever that is. Under no circumstance will I sit here or stand here and not let the public know that maybe the member's simple math wasn't that simple.

Maybe he didn't understand. I'll give him the benefit. I've worked with this member on the Finance Committee. I have a great deal of respect for him, but this does nothing of the sort as far as taking representation away from northern and rural B.C. What it does is guarantee our seats in this Legislative Assembly. We will be here, and we will speak on behalf of the people of the north and rural B.C. We will bring what their needs are, just as each and every member will bring forward, whether they are an urban MLA or a rural MLA, the needs of the people they represent.

The issue of going on about representation by population is really the fundamental basis of our

democracy. They have a tough job, when you look at the vastness, and I'm talking about the commissioners who were asked to go out and come back with recommendations. I guess I disagree with what they said in the report.

I'll speak to northern and rural representation again. We have a deviation factor in the existing legislation that says plus or minus 25 percent. I can tell you that Peace River South and Peace River North, for example, both exceed that. I believe every constituency in the north part of this province is beyond that deviation of minus 25 percent.

We have options, and the commission had options and has options. That option is in determining the boundaries as under section 9(1)(c), and I would like to read that out for the people at home, because it's probably not some reading that they take to bed and look at every night.

It reads right now:

"In determining the area to be included in and in fixing the boundaries of proposed electoral districts, the commission must be governed by the following principles: (a) that the principle of representation by population be achieved, recognizing the imperatives imposed by geographical and demographic realities, the legacy of our history and the need to balance the community interests of the people of British Columbia."

That's 9(1)(a).

Then 9(1)(b) continues, and it says:

"To achieve that principle, the commission be permitted to deviate from a common statistical Provincial electoral quota by no more than 25%, plus or minus."

That's where we get the 25 percent deviation.

Then the unique part of this, in recognizing I think many parts of northern and rural British Columbia, is 9(1)(c), which says:

"The commission be permitted to exceed the 25% deviation principle where it considers that very special circumstances exist."

For the years I've studied politics and looked at what they've done, whether it goes back to Josiah Wood's 1999 report or the changes, I believe, even in 1988, they're special circumstances. The reality is that although we don't have the population and the people of.... I'll speak for the northeast, and probably I can speak for the better part of rural British Columbia. We don't expect to have the equal number of MLAs that they would have in downtown Vancouver. We understand representation by population.

[1600]

If we looked at it a little differently.... I'll throw this out: if it was representation by wealth generation, I can tell you that the northeast part of our province would probably have 50 MLAs. But we aren't asking for that.

I've stood here on my own a couple of times, but I don't see this as a political issue. I thought this was one where we would come together and go: "All right. We're going to look after rural and northern B.C., look after their representation." But apparently not.

Apparently, the opposition does not stand for northern and rural B.C. If their members are watching out there right now, I would think they're going to have to be concerned. I would think they're going to

have to be very concerned. To hear that they think this is about manipulation.... The manipulation is guaranteeing northern and rural B.C. representation — something I take very seriously. Hopefully, the members across the way do.

This isn't about having somebody elected only in the lower mainland and looking after those interests. We are a province that works together. I've said that many times in this Legislative Assembly.

We talked about the commission going out and talking to not only members of the public but members of this Legislative Assembly. I can proudly tell you that I made a presentation to the commission. I spoke to them in Dawson Creek.

It's interesting, although we maintain.... I want to speak to that issue. People say: "You aren't losing an MLA in the northeast." No, I guess we're not losing one. There are certainly recommendations right now to alter the boundaries, for which I have a significant amount of concern.

I was at the meeting, and I listened to the people. There weren't a great number of people, so I'm not saying there were hundreds of people that flooded the hall to speak to this issue. I think most people felt that the change in 1999 was one they were just getting used to now, to be honest.

The change that came out in the preliminary report, which showed a Northland riding, would have a 52-percent deviation — not 25, not 34, not 44, which I believe is the greatest one right now, but 52 percent. It made no sense to me, and I certainly hope the commission re-evaluates that determination on that.

I think both Peace River South and Peace River North are appropriately sized right now. I think the members that are there represent the people, just as each and every one of us do and as we will continue to do.

I know that we're going to hear numerous Members of the Legislative Assembly talk about it and talk, on the political side, that this was the Premier playing games. This is where he's put them. I also heard a member saying that he may put them there for his own political advantage.

As I said, I believe that Surrey right now is represented by four MLAs from the opposition. I think there are only three from the government side. So if Surrey was to gain one or two more — wherever this ends up — I can't buy your argument, folks. It doesn't make sense. It's like the simple math that was pointed out on the dilution factor, which doesn't make sense as well.

Whichever Premier brought this forward to correct this.... I'll stand here and thank him, whether it was a New Democrat Premier, a B.C. Liberal Premier or a B.C. Social Credit Premier, or whoever the Premier of the day was. It's the right thing to do, and that's what we're asked to do here. I'm not saying we have to agree on everything, but to the surprise of the public, on occasion we probably do agree on some things.

This is one I'm surprised we don't agree on. I guess I've heard one speaker, so maybe there will be others from the opposition that are going to stand up and prove me wrong. But the argument on the reason to

oppose this, put forward by the member for Surrey-Whalley, just doesn't make sense. It just doesn't make sense.

The other issue that we talk about.... The opposition will have you believe that this is the Premier doing this. I want to read something that's actually part of this as well. It's part of the report. It's on page 356, I believe. Let's see.

It says: "Our commission's proposed electoral boundaries are only proposals." This is what it says in the report, which I'm sure every member here has read. "The final decision respecting adoption of our proposals rests with the Legislative Assembly, which section 14 of the legislation states...."

I want to read this: "If the Legislative Assembly, by resolution, approves or approves with alterations the proposals of the commission, the government must, at the same session, introduce a Bill to establish new electoral districts in accordance with the resolution."

[1605]

It seems pretty straightforward. I think we have, by statute, a requirement in law in British Columbia that says after every second general election in British Columbia, there will be an electoral boundaries review. That's what takes place. That isn't the government saying that. That's what we do by law.

It isn't somebody that woke up one day and said: "It's time to do a review so that we can maybe look at some boundaries and get them working in our favour." This is the law that's laid out under the act as it sits today, under the act as it's presented to be amended.

But the key issue here is solidifying rural and northern representation. I'll go on at some length on this, and I may be repetitive, but let me tell you: the wealth in this province is generated in rural and northern B.C. But you know what? That doesn't mean that the cities aren't needed.

The cities are a huge part of what we do, because although we extract the wealth through resource extraction, we need the cities. We need the people that live in every area of this province to make sure that our economy continues to grow and prosper. There are opportunities for our children to move within this province, not out of it. We've done that, and we should be proud.

The debate that takes place far too often is about: "This is wrong, and that's wrong, and this is why this is done." I've been here close to seven years now, and it's pretty rare that I hear: "You know, I don't agree with that, and here's what I have to offer as an option." It would be a great point.

I'm still waiting, and I'm hopeful. I'm optimistic that that's the way we'll see governments and opposition work. If I could hold my breath that long, I'd be superhuman, I guess, but it's going to happen one day.

The issue, again, that we're talking about today is not earth-shattering. Bill 39 is a pretty quick read. It's two pages long. I encourage the public, if they're interested, to have a look at it. Don't be swayed by comments. Take the bill, read it yourself, and then weigh out what you've heard, whether you believe this is the right thing to do or not.

Each of the regions identified.... We've identified a number of regions. This bill is set on the basis of protecting rural and northern representation — no more, no less.

I want to go back to the dilution of rural representation. If there were people out there in northern or rural B.C. listening to the member for Surrey-Whalley who didn't understand the actual numbers that are being presented in the new legislation or what was in the old, they may be able to sit there and go: "My God. What is going on?"

Well, I'm here to tell you that the simple math that the member spoke about was wrong. It may be the same math that was used to balance a number of the budgets in the 1990s — I'm not sure — but it was wrong, and I think mistakenly, not intentionally. I think it was an interpretation by the member from Surrey-Whalley that just was off base. Having known the member, I think that's probably the reason.

The issue here — and I'm not going to carry on for an hour or a half-hour — is very basic. We're going to protect northern and rural representation. We're going to allow for expansion of MLAs in some of the fastest-growing regions in this province, which is based on representation by population. I don't hear anybody saying that they don't aspire to that. I think it's part of the democratic process that we live in, in our country.

But there are other things. When you read this 500-page report, I think the commission has rightfully demonstrated that there are things other than just population that have to be considered. Geography is important. Our demographics — what takes place in this great province that we all sit here and represent.

I heard the member across the way talk about how proud he is to come in here and how he's in awe of this building. I can tell you that I think each and every one of us probably is, and I hope they are. I couldn't agree more with your comments. Every day that I walk in here to represent the people of Peace River South.... I can tell you that it is a feeling you can't explain.

We're elected. We're elected to come down here and do the best we can. We have a government; we have an opposition. Obviously, just on the basis of the name, opposition is there to oppose. I think you can oppose things. But on occasion....

This works both ways, and it'll cut for government too. If the government comes up with something that makes some sense, I see no harm in the opposition in saying: "Good on you. We agree with that." That does happen on occasion.

Likewise, if the government has a plan and the opposition puts something forward that kind of tweaks government to go, "You know, that does improve this," then we should listen as well. In a nutshell, that's good government. That's good democracy.

[1610]

Are we there yet? I think we probably all have some work to do, whether it be government or opposition, but that's what we're going to work towards.

In closing, Madam Speaker, I do want to say that I wholeheartedly support Bill 39 for the reason that it

truly does protect northern and rural representation. It allows for the growth of MLAs in the fastest-growing regions of this province, which reflects our issue of representation by population.

I will always do what I can to ensure that rural and northern representation in this province is never diminished but is held and grown until I can't do that fight anymore, which will be when they put me in the ground.

D. Routley: I rise today to express my extreme displeasure in opposition to this bill, and notwithstanding the comments of the previous speaker, I have no fear of offending anyone on the other side except one. That might be the Premier because, of course, he is the one-man government of British Columbia.

The other members, quite clearly, really have very little input into the decision-making that our Premier undertakes. So I'm sure they won't be offended by my criticism of them and our Premier for his plan to write his own map for the electoral boundaries of British Columbia, and that's what this bill does, in effect.

Bill 39 represents the Premier's personal and political interference into the affairs and proceedings of the Boundaries Commission. This act attempts to seize upon the pursuit of fair representation for the north and coat-tail eight favourable seats for him and his B.C. Liberal Party.

If the B.C. Liberal Party were so very concerned about rural representation, then why were they not participants in the original round of hearings? Why were they so absent? Why — before, during and after — were they voiceless when it came to protecting the interests of rural B.C., electorally and otherwise, until the preliminary report was issued on August 15?

Then there was reaction, because the shock that was endured by the Premier was that the map didn't favour him. The map didn't favour him the way he would have preferred, so he intervened.

Madam Speaker, I remember — I don't know exactly how old I was, about 20 years old — when the episode of "Gracie's finger" took place, the drawing of a boundary to include basically one neighbourhood to turn an electoral result.

That resulted in outrage from the people of British Columbia and outrage expressed in this House. This one appears to be the quantum leap from "Gracie's finger" to "the Premier's forearm," because we have witnessed an exercise in futility on the part of the Boundaries Commission.

In good faith, that commission travelled this province, visited 30 communities and basically spent 12 weeks and \$3 million of taxpayers' money, with meetings in between their hearings to keep themselves informed of what kind of views they were hearing. They also held two meetings for the MLAs, and they held one meeting for the parties.

They took all of that consideration and consultation, did their due diligence and drew a map that was unfavourable to the Premier. And he seized on the northern representation as his excuse for railroading eight more seats into regions that he preferred.

[1615]

If the member would like.... The previous member, from Peace River South, spoke about the math employed here. Basically, yes, three seats were returned to the north. But with the addition of eight seats in urban areas, the dilution of rural voices is such that their proportion of representation in this House, with eight new urban seats, diminishes by 25 percent. Their representation by percentage of seats is reduced by 25 percent.

If northern representation were the true motivation for this plan, then, as has been pointed out by Paul Willcocks, noted columnist in *The Province*: "Remember, the commissioners only proposed adding five new seats to urban areas. So even if the instructions are to protect the three rural seats that faced elimination, the Legislature would only need to go to 84 members."

I guess we're lucky that the Premier decided on eight before the recent political troubles the B.C. Liberal Party has endured, or we might have seen 12 or 14 jammed into areas that the Premier would prefer.

When the Premier pulls out his magic marker and draws the map that he would most prefer, he looks for an excuse in order to impose that on British Columbians. The excuse was a reduction in northern representation. That is a principle that many of the members on this side of the House, including myself, attended meetings in order to express.

There were no Liberal members at the meetings I attended, and I think there were very, very few at other meetings. Their concern for this principle seems to be adopted fairly recently, fairly pragmatically and fairly certainly with the purpose of preserving a majority that they're afraid of losing.

It seems cowardly that they would resort to this obvious mechanism. But from the opposition point of view, perhaps we should be pleased that they would employ such an arrogant mechanism and should rest assured that there will be a rejection of this by British Columbians, based simply on the principle that this commission should be independent.

Only twice since the days of the independent commissions has there been an overruling — in Saskatchewan, I believe, and in the Northwest Territories. Now B.C. joins that list, and the Premier will have his way.

Chief Electoral Officer Harry Neufeld has indicated that he needs just under a year, meaning that the boundaries need to be ready no later than June. So there will be no time for adequate public consultation on this next round of decision-making.

That's unfortunate for all of us, because we come here entrusted to represent people with fairness and with integrity, and this bill flies in the face of all of that. This bill tells British Columbians that when the Premier doesn't get what he wants, he'll rewrite the rules to get what he wants.

We've seen that in Bill 29. We've seen that with every Liberal exercise. We see it with the TransLink legislation. When the Liberal Party and their ministers and their Premier don't get what they want, they turn over the game board and write new rules. That is sad, and it's below the expectations of British Columbians.

Only the Northwest Territories and Prince Edward Island — I'm sorry, not Saskatchewan — have inter-

fered with independent electoral boundary commission reports. That was in 1998 and 2006 in the Northwest Territories and in Prince Edward Island in 2006.

The Premier has said that in adding eight seats, he is somehow protecting rural representation. Why did he choose 87 seats in total? Back in 1996 the Premier promised this province that he would reduce the number of seats to between 50 and 60. He promised that. He promised a lot of things that weren't delivered, but this is just one more.

[1620]

I'd like to quote from the Premier at the B.C. Liberal Party convention in Vancouver on November 18, 1995: "We will reduce the size of the Legislature from 75 seats to between 50 and 60. People want fewer politicians, not more." So what happened?

The Premier also notes in the *Vancouver Sun*, November 20, 1995, just two days later: "I have yet to have any British Columbian tell me the answer to our problem is more politicians."

What happened? The Premier needs more seats, because he knows his government faces trouble. The Premier doesn't like playing by the rules, so he changes them.

Commentators around the province have condemned this act as a bald-faced manipulation, an intervention, an interference. The preliminary report was broadly fair, other than the reduction of the three rural seats. The Premier's answer to this is: "We'll give you your three seats back, but we want eight in the urban areas, even though the commission recommended five."

I wonder where that came from. Is this a case of give him an inch and he wants a mile? It seems that we'd have to hear a call from someone in order for this to become a priority for the Premier, and I'd like to know who called for this. Who in British Columbia called for eight new politicians? Who?

Michael Smyth was right.

Interjection.

D. Routley: It's hard to say, but Michael Smyth was right when he said in the *Province* on September 18, three days after the release of the preliminary report:

"What is Campbell thinking here? Hmm, could it be Liberal politics, perhaps?"

"Campbell" — excuse me, the Premier — "announced the new MLAs will represent 'growing regions of the province.' Based on census data, that likely means Greater Vancouver, the Fraser Valley and the Okanagan will get the new MLAs.

"What a coincidence that these areas are generally hotbeds of Liberal Party support. Looks to me like Campbell is securing...."

Deputy Speaker: Member, remember not to use people's names.

D. Routley: Yes, the Premier is securing

"...himself a three-peat in the Premier's office. The Liberals will never admit such a thing, of course.

"The Premier says this is all about protecting rural voters."

If it were, why would he increase the eight seats in the urban areas and thereby create a 25-percent dilution of the proportional representation of northern and rural B.C. in this House? Why would he do that if his real motivation were to protect northern representation? It's obvious from all of this that the Premier is interested in one thing only, and that is protecting his own political fortunes.

The Premier sent a letter to the Speaker protesting the report and announcing his intentions to rewrite the map that was given to him by the commission.

Interjection.

D. Routley: Pardon me?

Deputy Speaker: Member, continue.

D. Routley: The member across the way will have a chance to speak, presumably, on the report when it's his turn. Perhaps he won't have a chance to speak. Maybe we'll see a free vote. Maybe we would see a free vote.

The Premier's basic contention is that he's protecting rural seats. Let's examine the B.C. Liberal record in terms of their commitment to rural B.C. Let's examine what the Premier has actually done for rural B.C.

He has cut funding for B.C.'s women's centres and community-based rape crisis lines. That's a wonderful step to protect the interests of rural B.C. He closed 24 courthouses — another great step to protect rural B.C. He closed our legal aid offices — another great step to protect rural B.C. He closed 28 assistance offices — sad. He forced the closure of local child care resource and referral centres in rural areas.

That's really sticking up for northern British Columbia. He should feel proud of that record.

[1625]

In terms of seniors services, he's cut their services. He broke his promise to build 5,000 new long-term beds. He has forced seniors to move hundreds of kilometres away in order to receive treatment or care. He has cut the amount of hours that thousands of our seniors can expect for home care services. He has separated aging couples, several of whom have very quickly perished after that. Is this his commitment to rural B.C.?

He says that the motivation for Bill 39 is a commitment to rural B.C., yet this is his record in protecting the services in rural B.C. He has closed hospitals in Kimberley, Lytton, Sparwood and Enderby and downgraded many, many other hospitals — including the Ladysmith Hospital in my own riding. That's his commitment to rural B.C.

This excuse is nothing more than that — a vacant excuse. The worst that he's done for rural B.C. in my own experience, in my own riding, was the allowance of such a radical increase in the export of raw logs and the severing of benefit and the removal of rural communities from the value chain.

The odd little piece is spit back towards the communities. The odd little piece is put back in nothing more than a welfare-like scheme, rather than including

our communities in the value chain. Yet he says that Bill 39 is meant to protect rural communities.

He increased the export of raw logs from our communities at the same time that we lost our sawmills. That's his commitment to rural B.C.

As I speak to his reasons for Bill 39, his stated reason is to protect the interests of rural British Columbia. Yet this is his record of commitment to rural B.C.

He scrapped Forest Renewal B.C. — provided assistance and retraining. That was another exercise of commitment by our Premier to rural B.C.

Over 40 sawmills have shut down in rural B.C. since 2001. Yet his commitment to rural B.C. is reason enough for Bill 39 and an intervention and interference in political process.

The Premier has closed schools in every small community of this province. The Premier's policies and his underfunding of education — his other commitment to rural B.C. — has resulted in rural B.C. losing their schools because he has abandoned the pursuit of equity, of equitable service, of equitable representation. Yet Bill 39 is excused by a commitment to rural B.C.

Let's take a look at what he did for rural B.C. in terms of education policy. He said that each student would be funded on a per-student basis, which obviously imposed economies of scale upon small communities that they could never hope to meet. That's his commitment to rural B.C.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

When the Premier did that to public schools and had the gall to tell the province that in fact he had increased the per-student grant to a level that had never before been seen, he at the same time downloaded huge, huge costs that could never be met except through drastic cuts in those schools, school closures and the movement to four-day school weeks.

Rural schools closed. Rural schools open four days a week. Is that a commitment to rural B.C.? We don't feel like it in rural B.C.

It's with some surprise that we see our name used as an excuse for this bill, because this bill does anything but protect rural B.C., as it reduces the proportional representation of rural British Columbians by 25 percent.

[1630]

When it comes to environmental protections, the Premier did away with the Environment Ministry completely. Is that a commitment to rural B.C.? He did away with conservation offices and conservation officers. He brought in the streamlining act, which took away the voice of rural B.C. in determining its future.

Bill 30 takes away the voice of rural B.C. in determining their future. Yet Bill 39 is excused by protecting the interests of rural British Columbians? It's unbelievable. In fact, it's with disbelief that rural British Columbians read this and find out that their government is using their name and their interests to excuse the most obvious manipulation, the most obvious political interference the province has ever seen, in Bill 39.

The sale of TFL lands all around the province — the Kootenays, Jordan River on the Island.... Is that the commitment to rural B.C.? Fracturing our land base, severing us from the benefit of our resources, and yet we measure commitment in those areas and then see the Premier excuse this bill with the term "protecting rural representation, rural interest." I hardly think so.

The sale of B.C. Rail to CN and all the damages to the environment, the derailments.... Was that a commitment to rural B.C.? Was that a commitment? I don't think so, Mr. Speaker. That was a commitment to Liberal insiders and cronies and donors. At the very least was the consideration of the interests of rural British Columbians.

If British Columbians are becoming confused and disillusioned and demoralized by watching the course of the Liberal bouncing ball from one disaster to another, from one interference to another, they can be excused for a growing cynicism when they hear words like "protecting rural representation."

The speaker before me, the member for Peace River South, said that he thought this was not earth-shattering. It may not be earth-shattering, but it's certainly shattering to any expectation of independence from a boundaries commission either now or in the future. It's shattering to people's expectations of democratic representation and political process.

It equates to more B.C. Liberal math when you talk about protecting rural northern interests, and yet you dilute the proportional representation by 25 percent. It's a bit like the Liberal education funding formula. It's faulty math.

If the math worked here, then wouldn't it work elsewhere? The funding formula in education would be similar to me telling my daughter: "You know what, Madeline? You don't have a \$15-a-week allowance now. You have a \$20-a-week allowance. How about that? That's the most allowance you've ever had. But now you're going to pay the heating bill, you're going to pay your mom the teacher's salary increase, and you're going to pay for the new computer I need to do my accounting."

That's what this government did to our school districts. To meet all those demands within their per-student funding formula, they had to cut teachers and more than double the rate of enrolment....

Deputy Speaker: Member, can you please keep your comments to Bill 39.

D. Routley: Absolutely.

That is the real equation for British Columbians. So when they say that putting back three seats in rural B.C. but adding eight in the urban areas is protecting rural representation, it's similar math, because the outcome is a big negative in rural British Columbia — a big negative if it comes from funding formulas in education, a big negative if it's protecting rural representation by diluting its proportional effect by 25 percent. Either way, it's faulty B.C. Liberal math.

[1635]

When we look at the history as detailed by the original speaker, the member for Surrey-Whalley, he points out the history of the Fisher commission and its

struggle to cope with the two-seat ridings and the notions of representation and the equality of vote — and makes the recommendation and the calculations that there should be no more than a 25-percent deviation from that.

Then we went to the commission of Justice Wood, and his first priority espoused was that regions don't lose representation, that historic and geographic patterns be considered, that there be minimal change, keep quotas in the regions similar in neighbouring ridings. There are a number of prerequisites to decision-making that haven't been updated by this government, but they had every opportunity to do that before this commission started.

If the purpose the Premier was pursuing was to preserve rural representation, why was that not a part of the terms of reference of the commission to start with? Because it wasn't. It was simply the excuse the Premier seized upon to put right a map that he disagreed with.

He could have protected rural seats without adding eight urban seats. He could have followed the commission's recommendations. He could have stood up and said, "Well, those regions deserve their representation. We'll put those eight back," and we would have had to go no further than 84 seats. But that didn't suit the Premier. He wanted more, and what he wants, he gets by changing rules. So that's what he did.

In urban areas, in fact, we've seen a 15-percent increase in their proportion of representation in this House under the 87-seat plan, and we've seen a zero increase in the number of seats in rural areas. The stand-still in rural areas is met by a 15-percent jump in the number of seats in urban areas. That results in a 25-percent reduction in the percentage of representation of rural communities inside this House. That doesn't sound, to anyone in my community, like protecting rural interests.

Let's go back to what the government did for rural communities. They failed to increase the municipal portion of the fuel tax. That was something they'd promised to do. They increased ferry fares.

Deputy Speaker: Member, would you please confine your comments to Bill 39.

D. Routley: Yes, I'll compare the Premier's commitment to rural communities, as espoused in this bill, with his actions.

Deputy Speaker: Commit your comments, please, to Bill 39.

D. Routley: Absolutely.

The Premier's commitment to rural B.C. is the supposed reason for this bill being introduced. If we are to accept that, we must examine his previous record of commitment to rural B.C.

I would say that his previous commitment has been one of abandonment and failure to meet the needs of rural B.C. So how can we accept a commitment to rural B.C. as the reason for this bill? How can we accept the word of a Premier who has closed schools, closed hospitals, closed courthouses, raised ferry fares, done

all of these things to rural B.C. and now stands up and uses their name to excuse his addition of eight seats in urban areas, which are widely seen as favouring him and his party? It's insincere, and people know it.

N. Macdonald: It's something else.

D. Routley: Yes, it may be something else. It's a sad day when British Columbians see their process polluted and manipulated in order to achieve the narrow goals of one party or another. And in this case, it's widely seen that way.

Vaughn Palmer on August 16, the day after the release of the preliminary report: "Had the commission taken the option of adding six seats, it might have provided the government with more opportunities, because many of the fastest-growing areas are represented by Liberals." So six wasn't enough. The Premier actually wanted eight.

[1640]

Paul Willcocks:

"It's a bit of a mess. The Electoral Boundaries Commission worked for 18 months and spent \$3 million working on new riding boundaries under the law. It had hearings set for this fall. The Premier turned that upside down, and it's not yet clear how it will be put back together. The legislation this fall will have to answer the questions about how much freedom the commission will have under this new plan. One way or another, it's going to cost more money — more money, more seats and more Liberal interference."

Back to "Gracie's finger." We saw "Gracie's finger" and the reaction to that. It's a notorious piece of B.C. history. And now, after "Gracie's finger," we're treated to "Gordo's forearm."

Deputy Speaker: Member, please withdraw that remark.

D. Routley: I withdraw.

B. Bennett: Mr. Speaker, the previous member would like to make this debate about the current Premier and the current government and the record of the current Premier and the current government. When I think about that, I think that would actually be a great opportunity for this side of the House. I will match up this Premier and this government against any NDP Premier that has ever existed in this province.

That was just some of the worst baloney I have ever heard in my seven years in this Legislature. Take a look around and see what you have in B.C. today compared to the dark, dismal days of the 1990s. Think about the jobs that we have and the investment....

Deputy Speaker: Member, will you please speak to Bill 39.

B. Bennett: I must be allowed to respond to what the previous member took 15 minutes to say.

Deputy Speaker: Member, please speak to Bill 39.

B. Bennett: Our taxes are lower — 35 percent personal income taxes, lower than under the NDP. Payments to disability clients are up. Payments to people on social assistance are up. I will match our record and the record of this Premier against any NDP Premier that has ever walked around this place in the past.

Mr. Speaker, thank you for that opportunity. It's not nearly long enough. I have lots more that I could say.

One thing is crystal-clear to me, and that is that this side of the House supports rural British Columbia, and the other side of the House wants to play politics on this bill. What I'd like to do is just take a few minutes and talk about what this legislation actually does, because it's easy to lose track of what the legislation actually says.

Every second election, a commission is established and appointed, and that commission has to determine whether the electoral boundaries in the province are suitable, based on the parameters that are set out in the legislation. The legislation sets out limits. In fact, the legislation states that it "must be governed by principles." Some of these principles, the major principles, are representation by population....

That's probably the pre-eminent principle by which the commission has to do its work, but there are other factors, as the legislation states. There's the availability of communications and transportation. There are the geographic and the demographic realities. There's legacy of history. There are rates of growth, etc.

Now, the commission is permitted to deviate 25 percent, plus or minus, in terms of representation by population. If they exceed that 25 percent, plus or minus, there have to be what are known as very special circumstances. That's not defined in the legislation, so one never knows what a particular commission is going to define as very special circumstances. As it turned out, we didn't expect that this commission would define it quite the way they did.

But in fairness to the commission, the legislation really doesn't give the commission a lot of latitude in terms of deciding what the boundaries are going to be and how they're going to deal with a burgeoning urban population in this province because of the strong economy created by this government and declining rural populations because of the way the economy is changing there.

[1645]

In the spring of 2007 the government made an amendment to the legislation and allowed the commission to create up to 85 seats — not fewer than 79 and not more than 85. At the time, the Attorney General made public comments in this House and outside this House about how the government hoped that including those additional six seats would encourage and allow the commission to preserve the seats that we have today in rural British Columbia.

In fact, the commission actually refers to what the Attorney General said. They heard the Attorney General. We'd hoped that would be enough to save the rural seats. Obviously, it wasn't.

Now, a lot of people have criticized the commission. I've heard folks, frankly, from both sides of the House and members of the general public criticize the

commission for the work they did. I actually think that's unfair, because I think that the commission was in fact bound by the legislation as they interpreted it. As I said earlier, "very special circumstances" can mean different things to different commissions.

The commission found populations in the north and central B.C. and in the Columbia-Kootenay region, where I'm from, to be very, very low. They decided, within the context of this legislation, that in their preliminary report — given that this is not a final report; it's a preliminary report — they were going to have to delete three rural ridings.

You know what? The commission made it clear, in my opinion, in their preliminary report that if the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia didn't like the loss of those three seats, it could do what had been recommended a number of times, actually, over the last 30 or 40 years — certainly by the Wood commission. I won't read the quotation, because my colleague from the other side of the House has already used the quotation.

I should say that only lawyers would use the same quotation to make the opposite points, but that's what I'm doing. In fact, the quotation is actually a caution. I think they even use the word in a quotation. This is the Wood commission, I think, from 1999.

Basically, what they're saying is: "The way this is going in terms of demographics and population changes in British Columbia, the Legislature is going to have to legislate something if they want to protect those rural seats."

That was in 1999. We all know who was in government in 1999, and they didn't change the legislation — interesting position that they're taking on this now.

In any case, we did change the legislation in the spring of 2007. Obviously, we didn't do enough. I suggest that this amendment is actually a very measured, direct and clear response to the commission's message that it is the Legislature, the Legislative Assembly, that has the responsibility to change this legislation — not them, not the commission.

The commission has to work within the rules of the legislation. It's up to the legislators if we want to change that. That's what the commission has said. That's what a number of commissions have said, and that's what we're going to do. These sparsely populated areas will in fact, after this legislation passes, have adequate and fair representation.

Now for the rest of the province, under this proposed amendment, section 9 of the act will apply. Section 9 essentially spells out the whole representation-by-population principle except — and this is a very important exception — that this amendment limits the growth of seats to 87.

We have a choice in this Legislature with this particular legislation. We could just allow section 9 of the legislation to work. We could just see how many new seats the commission would recommend, because representation by population, with the exception of those three rural areas that we are going to protect — the north, central interior and Kootenay-Columbia.... We could just let the commission decide how many new urban seats we're going to have here in B.C.

I guarantee you that it's going to be a lot more than the number that is spelled out in this amendment. As somebody from rural British Columbia, that would concern me if I thought that we were going to have ten or 20 new seats from urban British Columbia. I think it's very, very important to protect the three that we have.

[1650]

I'm very proud that I work with a group of people, led by the Premier, that has decided to do this, because it is respectful, in my opinion, of rural British Columbia. But I also like the other side of this. I like the fact that we're not going to allow the commission to create however many number of urban seats that they would under section 9 of the legislation, and I think, frankly, it would be a lot.

My friend who sits beside me here in the House talked a little bit about what his area in the northeast provides to the province, particularly to the province's economy. He made a quip, I think, that we could actually change the whole legislation, and we could create seats on the basis of what economic production comes out of those various ridings. In his case, with the oil and gas industry there, he'd probably have a dozen seats or so up there.

In my case, you know, we would have a \$2 billion coal industry that pumps a lot of money, creates a lot of jobs — 2,600 full-time jobs with an average wage of about \$95,000 a year from my riding; the forest industry and a very strong and healthy tourism industry. It's an area of the province that's been sending resources and money to Victoria for over a hundred years. It's just so important that the people who live there actually feel like they are being represented in Victoria.

I think the fact that the opposition is prepared to see my region go from four seats to three seats.... They think that's a good idea, apparently. I don't get it; I honestly don't get it. I don't get the political strategy in this from the opposition. Why would they want to decrease rural representation? I just don't understand it. Maybe they've got somebody in the back room there, who has given them some advice that they maybe should check.

Something else that I don't think has been addressed to this point in the debate is that people told the commission quite clearly that they did not want to lose seats in rural British Columbia. I'm not making this up. You can go to the commission report, the preliminary report, and you can have a look there.

You'll see that the commission acknowledges.... There were a lot of people that went to those commission meetings, and they said: "We don't want to lose our seat in Kootenay-Columbia. We don't want to lose our seat in the Cariboo and Thompson. We don't want to lose our seat in the north." They acknowledge that. But again they said: "Legislature, if you don't like that, you've got to change the legislation."

Well, I don't know. This is a strange place, and parties sometimes take positions for strange reasons. I don't understand the opposition on this one. They've used the old term "gerrymandering" here, which to me

is an absolute insult to rural British Columbians. That is what that is. You're insulting the people in the rural part of the province and trying to make this a political debate about the Premier or about the government's record. To me, it's just trying to get people's eye off the ball.

It's a little bit like what I've heard recently about the opposition's interest in public safety. They voted against the budget that's going to increase the number of police out there in our communities, but then they stand up in the House and say: "We believe in public safety." It's a little bit like that. It's also a little bit like voting against a MLA salary and then taking it. It's a little bit like that too.

It's also a little bit like, "We're such good stewards of public money," which I've also heard recently here in the Legislative Assembly from the opposition. "We would be such good public stewards of money, not like you Liberals."

We sit here, and we think: well, what about the 1990s? What about when you actually had the opportunity, when you were in government, not opposition? What about then? Were you good with public money?

I'm not going to go there, Mr. Speaker, so you don't have to worry. I'm not going to go there. I think most people, even people on the other side of the House, know the answer to that question.

I guess it's a little bit like pretending that you care so much about British Columbia, so much for rural British Columbians, but you don't want them to have fair representation. I don't get it. I don't get that logic.

[1655]

Personally, I am very proud to support the legislation. I'm very proud to be a member of this government and to work under the greatest Premier that I think the province has ever had. With that, Mr. Speaker, I thank you for my time, and I'll sit down.

N. Macdonald: Let's begin with this fact. There was a...

Deputy Speaker: Member, I'd like you to direct your comments towards Bill 39. If I can remind all members of that.

N. Macdonald: Absolutely. I'm going to take 30 minutes to direct my comments to Bill 39 — 30 minutes. Listen carefully, because there's a lot that we need to go back to, and we need to review some of the things that have been said by the Attorney General and some of the things that were said previously by the Premier.

Let's begin with this. Let's begin with the process that was in place. The opportunity to speak to the commission came in a number of different places. There was an opportunity here in Victoria for MLAs to present. From the NDP rural caucus we had two representatives go and speak for us. There was the member for Cariboo North, and you had the member for Skeena. NDP rural caucus made a presentation and made a strong argument for rural representation. There were no B.C. Liberals there.

I drove three hours to get to Cranbrook. Cranbrook is where it was being held. I was there. I made a strong argument for rural British Columbia. I didn't say where

the boundaries should be put, but I explained to the commissioner the challenges that I had as a rural British Columbia MLA. There were no B.C. Liberals there.

I drove three hours, and as you go around and look at the opportunity to make presentations, you will again and again see that it was B.C. NDP MLAs that were respecting the process and were there and were taking advantage of the opportunity the legislation offered them, because we respected the process.

Let's go back and just remember what we did here two years ago. We were in unanimous agreement with a set of instructions that we gave to the commission — in unanimous agreement. We sat and debated it just two years ago. What flowed from that? You had a commission that travelled the province for 18 months. It spent millions of dollars doing what this House told them to do.

NDP MLAs, the rural NDP caucus, respected that process, used it, made strong arguments. It would have been nice if we would have had a few B.C. Liberal MLAs doing the same thing. There were a few, and I respect the fact that my colleague from Peace River South did go and present and made the same arguments we all made.

Hon. S. Bond: He's not the only one.

N. Macdonald: He's not the only one. But the numbers for the B.C. NDP were strong, and the numbers for the B.C. Liberals were very, very few.

The point about Bill 39 is this. It has been put forward by the Premier as something to help rural B.C., and I fundamentally disagree with that premise. The premise that the Premier could care less about rural B.C. is completely and absolutely unsupported by any evidence. The rationale by government — and through the Attorney General he made that point — that this is about rural B.C. is as phoney as the heartlands strategy was. It simply does not match with the experience that we've had in my part of rural British Columbia.

The fact of the matter is that the Premier saw the map. He didn't like it. He has the power here to do whatever he pleases, and so instructions came in to change it. That is what he is doing here with this legislation.

An independent commission, properly instructed by this House, went out and did the work it was supposed to do. It did it for 18 months. It did that work through public process. It spent millions of dollars, but when the Premier saw the map, he didn't like it. Instead, he brought in legislation that will fundamentally interfere with that independent work. Not only that, it's just sloppy work.

[1700]

It is sloppy for a government to give instructions to a commission and then two years later think: "Oh, why did we do that? We should have thought ahead of time." Yeah, you should have thought ahead of time. Now, does the Premier really care about rural people? That's the premise of this bill — that he absolutely cares. What I would say is that, in my area, people would find it difficult to believe that this is a Premier who focuses on the needs of rural people.

I'll give you an example that has come up recently: the meat inspection regulations. Would a Premier who cares about rural people, as he says he does as a premise for this bill, go two years where people in rural areas have consistently said he's going about it the wrong way and he is going to put people out of business? Would a Premier who cares about rural B.C. ignore that and set up a situation where...? If there's a rural MLA here who has not heard from people affected by the meat inspection regulations, I'd be surprised.

Consistently, they have said that it is going to make a mess for the farming industry. If this Premier is using as his premise — and the Attorney General made the same argument — that he cares about rural people, I don't see any sign of that in my area, certainly not with the meat inspection regulations. That's a mess, and it points a deaf ear to what, for two years, processors have been trying to say.

I'll give you another example, and it's a recent example that people in rural areas will point to. If the Premier is saying that Bill 39 is about rural people, they would ask about rural agency stores, then. Rural agency stores are important parts of our communities. As part of their business, they sell liquor, but the prices they have to pay, the discounts they get, are different than the big liquor stores. Is there any reason for that? There is not. It is simply an indifference to rural concerns. So that argues against the Premier being somehow a champion of rural life.

I go back to cuts in funding. We used to have women's centres that were funded. But we don't. If the Premier says that this bill is about....

Deputy Speaker: Member, please direct your comments to Bill 39.

N. Macdonald: Absolutely.

The premise for Bill 39 that the Premier gave and the Attorney General gave was a concern for rural life. I would say the people that I represent would find that hard to believe, and my argument is that that is simply not the real reason. The real reason for this legislation has to do with something else, and it is the Premier's own political interest. It is not a genuine concern for rural people.

I would support that by reminding him about cuts to women's centres. These are cuts that were made in rural British Columbia. They profoundly impacted services for women in rural British Columbia. It would be difficult for those people impacted to say that we had a Premier who was concerned about rural interests when that happened. You had cuts to community-based rape crisis lines — services that were important for rural British Columbia — and it would be difficult for people in rural B.C. to think that that is something a Premier who cares about rural B.C. would do. So the premise used for this bill, again, is clearly contradicted by that action.

I'll give you another example: 24 courthouses closed in rural B.C. Are those the actions of a Premier who cares about rural British Columbia? In my riding,

too, in Kimberley-Revelstoke, with all of the complications that that creates for people trying to get services.... Yet that is what happened.

Now a Premier stands up and says that he is doing something with this bill that is for rural British Columbia. It is impossible for people in my community to believe that that is in any way true. What about closing legal aid offices? What about the closures to child care resource and referral centres? If it was not for a vigorous opposition, that would have happened, and the complications for families in rural areas would have been profound.

Yet you have a Premier who stands up and says that his biggest concern, the reason for this bill, are the interests of rural people. It makes no sense, and I can tell you that people at home who hear the Premier say that reject it completely. They simply do not buy that that is in any way the reason.

[1705]

You have cuts to services to rural seniors and the breaking of promises....

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member.

N. Macdonald: Yes?

Deputy Speaker: I'm going to ask you to please direct all your comments through Bill 39. I would appreciate that.

N. Macdonald: Absolutely. The premise....

Deputy Speaker: Member. I'm stating I would like you to make your comments through Bill 39. Thank you.

N. Macdonald: Absolutely.

The premise that was put forward by the Attorney General was that this was about rural representation. What the Premier has said is that Bill 39 is about his concern for rural people. What I am saying clearly is that that in no way reflects the reality the people in my area experience — in no way.

Let's talk about education. The number of....

Interjection.

N. Macdonald: Well, the member can have his opportunity to speak when the time comes.

Interjection.

N. Macdonald: Well, stand up and speak, because on TransLink you've been silent. You've said nothing. If you want to speak, stand up.

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member.

For all members, all comment is to be directed through the Chair.

Please continue, Member.

N. Macdonald: Fine. Absolutely.

Education. I can link it there as well. There's a Premier who says that rural B.C. is important, but it is a Premier that has seen the unprecedented shutdowns of rural schools and the school that I was a principal of. The changes to funding formulas by this government led directly to a funding shortage, which meant that schools were shut down in unprecedented numbers. In my region, the region that I represent, over ten schools closed. Now, is that the work of a Premier that cares about rural areas? I suggest that it is not. It is absolutely not. Now, this legislation is put forward as being because of interest in rural people?

Let's talk about some other changes. Let's talk about changes to seniors care, a promise of 5,000 beds. Did it happen? It did not. Did couples get split because it did not happen? Absolutely.

Deputy Speaker: Member. Please, I am going to ask you again to direct your comments through Bill 39.

N. Macdonald: All right.

Bill 39 was introduced with the Attorney General stating that it was in the interests of rural people. He asked us to believe that the Premier did this because he wanted to help rural people. I am saying that the people in my area would reject that as a possibility completely.

What we have is an imposition of police taxes on Golden, Canal Flats, Radium, Invermere — all of those impositions without any additional services. Is that the action of somebody who is supportive and feels that rural people are in any way important? There is nothing about that that leads to that conclusion. I reject the premise, the central argument put forward by this government, that that is the reason for this legislation. So it is something else, clearly.

They closed hospitals. They closed hospitals all over the place, including in Kimberley. Now, the members over here talked about the value, the amount of money, and they are absolutely right. The amount of money that rural B.C. puts into this province — Kimberley, \$20 billion from Sullivan mine over its hundred years.... That helped to build this province.

Yet what did this Premier do? He closed the hospital that the community built — not the province, the community. He closed it. He closed the courthouse. He closed the government offices. Now, how does that have anything to do with a Premier that is interested in rural British Columbia? It has nothing. He pretty well flicked the light off — when they were no longer of any use, flicked the light off on the way out. There is no government office left in Kimberley, a community that gave \$20 billion to this province. That is the action of a Premier that cares about rural B.C.? It is not.

[1710]

Is this a Premier that cares about rural B.C., when he puts an urban forests minister in charge of forestry at a critically difficult time? It is a difficult time and a difficult ministry, but in the past we always had forests ministers that were committed to making sure that the industry in rural B.C. was kept strong and intact. This Premier has shown no interest in that crucial industry.

Is that a Premier who can then come here and say that he is concerned about rural B.C.? There was nothing about that that supports that argument, so it is not the argument that the Attorney General makes. It is something else.

Interjections.

N. Macdonald: Well, keep listening. Here's some more.

Let's talk about education. Bill 39 is put forward as the Premier feeling that rural schools are important. Well, I taught in Africa. In Africa we had schools that were open five days a week. Where do you come to where there is a province that has schools open only four days a week for budgetary reasons?

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member. Please relate your comments through to Bill 39.

N. Macdonald: Absolutely.

Bill 39 was put forward by the Attorney General. The argument that he made was that the Premier cared about rural B.C. The point that people in my area would make is that there is nothing about his actions that would support that premise. Therefore, that premise is false. Therefore, it must be something else.

It has to do with a Premier who looked at the map and thought, "Oh, that's not great. Let's scrap it. I'm the Premier. I can do what I want, and I will change it like that," which is the exact opposite of what should happen with an independent committee. You had a commission that was set out. They're supposed to be independent, but what you have instead is an arbitrary decision. "I didn't like that. I'm the Premier. I change it." How is that acceptable?

Interjections.

N. Macdonald: I am not. I am absolutely not. There will be an opportunity for the member to speak and an opportunity for us to do the right thing here.

What we can do is take this mess that's been handed to us and fix it. We will attempt to fix it. If this House is open to the idea that legislation can actually be improved in this House, it can be done. But my guess is that the minds are closed and that what the Premier has said....

Interjections.

N. Macdonald: They absolutely will.

I think I have more time, and I have many, many more things I would like to remind members here of, of what actually does happen out in rural B.C. I think people would be very interested to hear it.

Interjections.

N. Macdonald: I will — teach, exactly.

Let's talk about this. Would a Premier who actually cares about rural B.C. cut the conservation officer

service? Would they do that? Would they have communities, areas that are as big as some European countries, without conservation officers? Is that something that a Premier who understands rural areas would do? They would not.

What about appurtenancy? What about getting rid of that social contract? There was a time when the Social Credit, the NDP and the people of B.C. believed, and I think still believe, that wood coming from an area should be milled in that area. Jobs coming from public lands should go to people who live in that area. What happened to that concept? It happened that we had a Premier who does not care about rural people. That is absolutely clear to me. So when I hear the Attorney General stand up and say that this is for rural people, I say no. That is impossible. Nobody in my area would believe it. There is nothing about that that is believable.

Interjections.

N. Macdonald: Well, I'll leave the killing of cows and the B.C. Rail to my compatriot here, but what I will talk about is the loss of control. I will talk about independent power projects. I remember visiting someone concerned about independent power projects coming in....

Deputy Speaker: Member, through Bill 39.

N. Macdonald: Absolutely.

What she said was: "Does the Premier not care about rural people?" That's exactly what she said. We met with her. She's a councillor down near Christina Lake. They are going to impose an independent power project on us without us having any local say about that. That does not sound like a Premier who cares about rural people.

[1715]

What about the Significant Projects Streamlining Act? What about the sale of tree farm licences? What about the sale of those private lands? Is that something that a Premier who cares...?

Deputy Speaker: Member, one moment. Please take your seat.

Point of order.

Point of Order

B. Bennett: I spoke previously to the member who is speaking now, and I tried to defend the Premier and the government against the slanderous attacks of the members on the other side, and you restricted me to about five minutes, Mr. Speaker. The speaker who has the floor now continues to be off message in terms of what he's talking about. He continues to criticize government and the Premier, and he's getting personal. The rules ought to be the same for all speakers in this House.

C. Evans: Hon. Chair, my points are twofold. Firstly, I don't think that what we just heard is a point of order. Secondly, the member is speaking directly to

the argument put forward for the bill by the sponsor of the bill. The Attorney General has argued that the rationale for the bill is essentially the goodwill of the Premier towards rural B.C., and the member is standing up and arguing the point of the Attorney General as the rationale for the bill. So, hon. Speaker, even though the last guy talking didn't rise on a point of order, had he, his argument would have been wrong.

Hon. G. Abbott: It is to the Chair, not to members, to conclude whether an issue is a point of order or not. Secondly, I think the Chair has been remarkably patient with this member in allowing the submission that he has. The aim of second reading debate is to air the principle and the substance of the bill at hand, and what we are hearing is an amalgam of rhetoric. I have yet to hear at any point from this member whether he supports the bill or he doesn't, or for what reasons he wishes to do so.

Deputy Speaker: Member, would you please continue, but it's the general relevance of the bill. I would appreciate it if you would direct your comments directly to the bill.

Debate Continued

N. Macdonald: Absolutely, and I'll build to a conclusion. There's a press release right here put out by the Ministry of Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism. It's a press release, and it talks about exactly what I've been saying: the argument around what the Premier says about his concern for rural B.C.

That is an argument that I did not put forward. That's an argument that was put forward by the Attorney General, and I certainly will respond to that and make the point that I will eventually come to. I will come to a point....

L. Mayencourt: You'll never come to a point.

N. Macdonald: Absolutely.

This is a Premier who introduced a resort municipalities act so that he can arbitrarily step in. Now he argues that he wants to strengthen and that he believes in rural representation, when he has consistently taken away power from rural B.C. He talks about the importance of rural B.C., when in 2002 he renegotiated the highway maintenance. He cut it by 16 percent, so our highways are less well maintained than they would have been in the past.

It seems inconsistent to make an argument that the Premier cares about rural B.C. and then have those sorts of actions, which is why people in my area would reject completely the argument that the Attorney General makes.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members. Members. The member has the floor.

I've given the member a lot of leeway, and I would appreciate him working and making his comments to the relevance of Bill 39.

N. Macdonald: And I appreciate it. Of course.

I could think of other things that would show in action that a Premier cares about rural B.C. It has to be more than words.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Would a Premier that cares about rural B.C. have cut the flood protection in 2002 or downloaded all sorts of costs?

[1720]

I'll come to the point. The point is this: the argument put forward by government that this is out of concern for rural B.C. is not true. There is something else. I would contend that the point of this is a Premier that looked at the map, didn't like it and arbitrarily will change it, using the majority that he has here.

As it stands, this legislation does not strengthen rural representation. It weakens it. It diminishes it. It dilutes it. It does not respect a process that absolutely has to be independent. It has to be.

For a Legislature to casually step in and change it is something that every legislator here should be wary of. There are very good reasons why we establish independent commissions. And the standards that a Legislature sets.... It may be convenient for the Premier and the government at the time to go in and get what they want, but they set a standard that is fundamentally diminished. They allow any future government to look and say: "Well, they did. We can do it, and one better." We should be wary of that.

There is a way of dealing with this legislation that improves it. There is a way of improving it. There is a way of maintaining rural representation. Of all the members here, I would know about rural representation and the difficulties that are entailed with a large geographical area. There is a way of doing this that not only keeps representation in rural areas but that also shows respect to the independence of this commission. There is absolutely a way of doing it.

What this opposition is going to do is put forward an amendment that should get the support of all legislators here, if the outcome they want is rural...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

N. Macdonald: ...representation and a process that is respectful to an independent commission. It can be done, but only if this Legislature works in the way it should, where good ideas are welcomed. But I do not believe that's true. I do not believe it's possible in this Legislature because I do not believe the initial argument from the Attorney General that this is about rural B.C.

It is not. It is about a Premier that looked at the map, didn't like it and will do whatever he wants. The facts will be told by how this Legislature votes on the amendment. You see it, you listen to it, and I would invite you to argue against it, because it makes complete sense.

With that, I thank people for the attention they have given to my comments and for the opportunity to speak.

D. MacKay: I'm pleased to stand up today and talk about Bill 39 and in support of Bill 39. I'd like to start off my comments with an article. I'd just like to read it out. It says: "Everyone recognizes there have been population shifts across the province, but losing rural representation? That's a concern." That's from the newspaper called the *Revelstoke Times Review*, dated August 22, 2007. The author of that comment in the newspaper, of course, was the member for Columbia River-Revelstoke, the member that we just heard.

I'm certainly pleased to stand up here and speak to Bill 39 and in support of it. The purpose of Bill 39 is to protect rural seats. If you recall, the northern part of our province has eight seats, the Cariboo-Thompson has five, and the Columbia-Kootenay region has four seats. The initial report that came out from the Electoral Boundaries Commission suggested the loss of three seats, one from each of those areas, which I have to say doesn't sit well with me.

Before I get there, I have to comment on the fact that I listened to the member for Cowichan-Ladysmith. The cynicism and the negativity.... My goodness, it must be tough to get up in the morning and look at yourself in the mirror and think: "I'm going to go to work today and be negative about everything." It is really difficult to sit in this chamber and listen to that negativity. It reminds me of Joe Btfsplk from *Li'l Abner*, who used to walk around with a cloud over his head.

Mr. Speaker: To the bill, Member.

[1725]

D. MacKay: Again, Mr. Speaker, to speak to the member for Cowichan-Ladysmith, I took exception to some comments he made when he was speaking to Bill 39. He talked about the fact that there were no Liberals making a presentation to the Electoral Boundaries Commission. He didn't hear any voices, and he didn't see any of us.

You know, I think he's probably right there. I didn't actually travel down to Vancouver Island to make my presentation. I knew the commission was coming up into the northwest part of our province, and I actually travelled, much like the member for Columbia River-Revelstoke, who just spoke. He said he drove for three hours to make a presentation. Actually, I drove two hours to make a presentation. I spoke for about 20 minutes, and then I jumped in my vehicle after I listened to all the mayors from the communities that I represent make presentations to the Electoral Boundaries Commission at Burns Lake.

I listened to the resounding no from everybody that spoke. They did not like the proposed amendments that were in Bill 39 in the initial recommendations. Then I jumped in my vehicle and drove for two hours and returned to Smithers. Actually, there were a lot of people who made presentations to the Electoral Boundaries Commission.

I heard the member for Peace River South say that he had made a presentation.

Interjections.

D. MacKay: Member for East Kootenay, your turn is coming. Would you like the floor now?

Mr. Speaker: Members.
Continue, Member.

D. MacKay: I did travel to Burns Lake, and I made a presentation, and I was not happy with the proposed changes.

I guess probably what I have to do is give you some perspective on just how large the riding is that I represent. I'm going to give you some driving examples, so you can understand how large Bulkley Valley–Stikine is. It starts east of Burns Lake. If I got in my vehicle and started driving and I travelled through Smithers and up the Highway 37 corridor along the Alaska Highway, through Alaska to get to Pleasant Camp, I'd probably drive for 22 hours non-stop. That's non-stop driving just to get from one part of my riding to the other.

The fact that the Electoral Boundaries Commission came to Burns Lake.... They were going to come to only one community in the largest riding in the province to hear the people. The people in Atlin, the people in Pleasant Camp, the people in Dease Lake and Telegraph Creek — it's too far for them to drive to come down and make a ten- or 15-minute presentation. They rely on their elected representatives to stand there and make a point to the Electoral Boundaries Commission, and that's what I did. I was pleased to do it on their behalf, and I'll do it again.

The people from Dease Lake were not happy with what they saw, and I had a number of e-mails and phone calls from Dease Lake. I had a lot of phone calls from the small community of Atlin, and I had e-mails from Atlin saying that they did not like the initial report that was submitted by the Electoral Boundaries Commission.

Fraser, B.C. I've got to drive to Whitehorse to get to Fraser, B.C. I had phone calls from the Hazeltons; they didn't like it. So it wasn't the Premier that said he didn't like it. It was people that live in the northern part of our province, who we represent up there, who said: "We don't like what's in this initial report."

[K. Whittred in the chair.]

Bulkley Valley–Stikine presently has a deviation of minus 41 percent. There's a population of 30,648 people, according to the 2006 census. That's a deviation of 41 percent. If you look at the deviations throughout the rest of the north, it's quite interesting and quite large in numbers when you look at the plus-or-minus deviations.

Prince George–Omineca — they have a deviation of 29.1 percent. Peace River North — their deviation is minus 32.5 percent. I'm sorry if I misread that. Prince George–Omineca is minus 29 percent. Peace River North is minus 32 percent. Prince George North is minus 32.8 percent.

Prince George–Mount Robson has a deviation of minus 32.8 percent. Bulkley Valley–Stikine, which I represent, has a deviation of minus 41.1 percent. Skeena, which I believe is held by an NDP member today, has a deviation of minus 43.8 percent.

Peace River South has a deviation of minus 44.6 percent. North Coast, also held by an NDP member, has a deviation of minus 51 percent.

So all the ridings in the north are below minus 25 percent, and they were going to take a seat away from us. That was the recommendation of the Electoral Boundaries Commission: "We're going to take a seat away from you."

[1730]

Well, I'm assuming that those NDP ridings in the northwest part of our province heard from the people who live there and said: "This is not right. We can't let this happen."

What did we do? The people from the north said: "No, we don't like this." Those of us who were elected and represent people from our part of province said: "No, this is not going to happen. We can't let this happen. We don't need any more underrepresentation in the north."

So what we have today is a bill. It's called Bill 39. What it's going to do is protect those three seats that we were going to have removed. I'm certainly pleased to stand up here today and say that I support the bill. We have to support this bill. The people who live in rural and northern British Columbia deserve representation, just like the communities in the lower mainland and on Vancouver Island where the population is growing. They deserve fair representation.

I think this new bill, Bill 39, speaks highly of the shift in population. I think it speaks well for the representation by elected members in this chamber.

I think the hardest part of this whole exercise that we're going through today is not the redrawing of the new boundaries. I think it's going to be finding room in this chamber for the extra seats. That's where the problem is going to be, in my view.

We'll work this out. There will be people opposed to what we do. That goes without saying, but I can't believe the opposition are so negative all the time. My goodness.

I'm not going to spend a great deal of time here trying to explain the bill.

C. Puchmayr: Because you can't.

D. MacKay: I can't? I am. It's my turn.

Bill 39 is going to make sure that the people who live in the northern part of our province and in rural British Columbia continue to have representation. I'm pleased to stand here and support Bill 39 for that very reason.

G. Coons: It's an honour to rise and oppose Bill 39 in its present form. As was mentioned earlier, the press release put out by the government indicated that the amendments would preserve rural representation. My comments today are going to go to that and are going to look at issues raised by the member for Bulkley

Valley–Stikine and the trials and tribulations of traveling through his riding, uphill both ways.

I'd like to look at the three reasons that I oppose this bill. Number one, we've got to look at the independent commission that was assigned to the role of doing this — a very important role — and the government and the Premier's interference in the commissioner's work — the potential gerrymandering that could happen.

L. Mayencourt: Come on, now. You're not going to use that word.

G. Coons: I've used it. I've used that word.

I also have a major problem with the addition of eight more politicians and the dilution of the rural representation.

Now, in my....

Interjection.

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member. The member for North Coast has the floor.

Continue.

G. Coons: I'm sure the members opposite will have their opportunity to respond. I look forward to hearing them, whether the TV's on or off. I look forward to that.

Interrupting the commission's hearings and getting politically involved, wasting taxpayers' money, has undermined the work of the independent commission.

If they had actually been interested — if this Premier had actually been interested — in protecting rural representation, they would have provided the commission with a mandate to do that in their preliminary report.

[1735]

In their preliminary report.... As the member previous to me said, he attended meetings. But again, the voices of most Liberal representatives in this House were absent from the initial meetings of the commission — missing in action, silent about representing rural British Columbia.

The press release talks about "amendments preserve rural representation," indicating that this government is the champion of rural B.C. In my comments today I intend to prove that wrong, that they have not been the champion. These amendments will go nowhere to preserving rural representation. It dilutes rural representation.

Now, on the addition of eight new politicians: this is not what British Columbians wanted, and that's not what they expected. By one estimation, they say that these new MLAs will increase the budget up to \$4 million. Again, the eight new MLAs — and we presume, from this Legislature, that they will be in the urban and more populated regions of the province — will dilute and not preserve rural representation. The actions of this government have been consistently to undercut and to ignore rural concerns and issues. This is another example of this government prioritizing urban and suburban B.C. over our rural areas.

I'm proud to represent the north coast, a diverse and challenging region stretching from Stewart to the

Nass Valley, to Prince Rupert, Port Edward, out to Haida Gwaii, down to Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Klemtu — very challenging to get around.

When the commission came to Prince Rupert, there were about 30 or 40 of us out there, including the previous, the ex-MLA, Bill Belsey; and the Green candidate in the last election, Hondo Arendt. The voices spoke loud and clear for rural representation, not rural dilution.

Lo and behold, when the commission went over to the Queen Charlotte Islands, and they listened to those people on the north coast, they realized that something needed to be done. What came out of the north coast was that it was one of the few regions where the deviation from the average actually increased. They took population out of the north coast.

But the area I represent, or that members would represent in the north coast.... The region increased from 131,000 square kilometres to over 150,000 square kilometres that the MLA on the north coast has to represent.

The commission was listened to on the north coast, and we respect that. I was, as the members on the other side know, also in Prince George listening to the concerns after the initial report came out from the commission. Mind you, during the initial report — from the meetings from the commission — most members were noticeably absent in their response to protecting and preserving rural representation. It only came out that they were concerned about it when they were losing their seats.

As we move along, the one section of this bill that I would support is the directions in section 4(2), which directs the commission to consider the principle that effective representation requires that, for areas of B.C. that are most sparsely populated or geographically isolated, there must not be fewer MLAs than there are currently. But this is not included. This section is not included as an amendment to the act and may not necessarily have any further effect on the commission.

The riding that I come from.... The people in the north have seen constant decisions made by this government and this Premier to interfere, and in this situation, to direct the Electoral Boundaries Commission to add five more constituencies in the more populated areas of B.C., to the detriment of rural British Columbia.

[1740]

If this Premier — if this government — truly wanted to preserve rural representation, he would have put forth legislation to restore the three seats that were taken away in the preliminary report of the Electoral Boundaries Commission — restore them so there would be 84 seats. That would have been fine.

Interjection.

G. Coons: And I'm sure the member across the chamber would appreciate not having to fight for her seat with her other Liberal cronies in the Prince George area.

Interjections.

G. Coons: I take that back, hon. Speaker.

This Premier's slap in the face of the independent commission is playing politics with B.C.'s electoral boundaries and — as mentioned quite strongly on this side of the House — will only weaken rural representation in this Legislature.

The section of the bill that I and this side of the House have major concerns with is section 1, which makes changes to section 3 of the act. It directs the commission to increase the number of electoral districts to 87, and this removes the discretion of the commission to determine the number of seats in this Legislature.

The cost, as mentioned before, of 87 MLAs is not what British Columbians want. At public hearings we heard little interest in increasing or adding more MLAs to this assembly.

This type of political interference will only compromise the independent actions of the commission. We've made numerous submissions making the case that the new boundaries should preserve rural representation as a proportion of the seats of the Legislature.

The new tools. I read that in one of the press releases. I believe that the new legal tools this government is going to impose upon British Columbians and that are being legislated only continue this Premier's dictatorial attitude towards British Columbians. We've seen those legal tools before, when legal contracts were stripped, the rights of workers were abused and the most disadvantaged in our society were attacked.

Now, if I can go back...

Deputy Speaker: Member.

G. Coons: ...to the bill and look at preserving rural representation and how Bill 39 dilutes the representative voice in this House.

We look at the government interference, and I mentioned before for the members.... They will go on and on, on gerrymandering.

Oh my goodness. For those people out there who happen to be watching and tuning in, gerrymander means to divide a voting district or a region or a riding in such a way as to give unfair advantage to one political party. We are seeing that in Bill 39.

I took a clip off of *Bill Good* on CKNW. They talked about the amendments that preserved rural representation, and here's a quote from this show:

"Imagine a place where the political leader overrules an independent commission report on electoral boundaries. Imagine that leader orders more ridings be created in areas where his governing party is strongest and opposition weakest to win more seats in the next election. Imagine a place where the vote of a person in an opposition riding is worth just a fraction of the vote of a person in a government riding. Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, perhaps? No. Try British Columbia under this Premier."

That's not from my notes. That's from out there.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order.

G. Coons: I believe, hon. Speaker...

Deputy Speaker: Order, Members.

G. Coons: ...that voters....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. Order.

Interjection.

Deputy Speaker: Order, Member.
Continue, Member.

G. Coons: Now, British Columbians and voters should be screaming blue bloody murder about this Premier's outrageous gerrymandering in this bill, in Bill 39, with....

[1745]

Interjections.

G. Coons: This information bulletin 207AGOO36001357 is the highlight of this government's gerrymandering with this bill that we're discussing today. All the while the Premier claims to be protecting rural ridings.

Last week, in my researching of this, I came across a game on the Internet, and I actually played the game.

L. Mayencourt: Speak to the bill. Come on.

G. Coons: I am. I'm speaking to how this bill....

Sorry, hon. Speaker. I'll let you intervene if you think you need to.

This game was called the redistricting game, and when you play this game, you experience a classic abuse of the redistricting system, of partisan gerrymandering. Now, again, for those people out there, "gerrymander" comes from a famous case of redistricting in Massachusetts in 1812. I believe that when we look at rural representation and how this government promised in this bill to have effective representation.... I'm claiming that there is not effective representation and that the rural voice will be diluted.

But again, the governor of the time, Elbridge Gerry, signed a map into law that included a district shaped like a salamander, so they dubbed it after Elbridge Gerry and called it gerrymandering. And that was the shape of the district.

I can imagine the shape of the district that we might have preserved in the province by this Liberal government. I will let listeners out there, viewers out there, vision what type of district may be presented in the new electoral districts by this particular Premier. I'm not going to suggest any visions, but I'm sure you people out there would have some.

By exploring this game.... I'm sure the members on the other side have been playing it recently for the last couple of weeks so they can ensure that this bill does not preserve representation as the amendment bulletin talks about.

In here, in the game, you must redraw the districts to give your party a majority in three districts instead

of a current two. You play through the game, hon. Speaker, and I had a pretty good opportunity of doing that. I think I might know where we're headed when this government mandates 87 seats in this Legislature when British Columbians do not — do not — want them.

Now, when we look at the timing of this bill, the Chief Electoral Officer, Harry Neufeld, indicated he needs just under a year to get it ready, meaning we don't have enough time. Will there be public input into this? Will there be public meetings? Will there be follow-up, or will the government treat this like everything else? You have a public meeting, but they lock the doors. That's what's happening in this province.

The government could have given the commission a mandate to maintain the current levels, but they chose not to. In chapter 5 of the preliminary report, they stated the following:

"Our interpretation of our mandate leads us to conclude that no region of the province has an automatic entitlement to 'very special circumstances' status for some or all of its districts. Neither do we believe that it would be appropriate for us to begin our boundary-setting task with a presumption that each region of the province should be guaranteed its current level of representation. The Legislative Assembly could have made that our mandate, but it did not. Rather, we are governed by the overriding constitutional and legal requirement to strive for relative parity of voting power among electoral districts and to deviate from parity only to the extent necessary to ensure effective representation."

This government had an opportunity to ensure effective representation for rural constituents and rural British Columbians. Now, when we look at the addition of the eight new MLAs that will be stockpiled somewhere in this room, I don't know if there are going to be bunk seats or what, hon. Speaker.

[1750]

We look at the flip-flop of this government and the Premier when he campaigned in 1996 on reducing the number of MLAs to less than 60. Where are those thoughts coming from? Another broken promise.

"We will not rip up contracts." Oh, that rings through the ears of workers throughout British Columbia. Here's another one. Not only did he increase the MLA salaries....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. Order.

G. Coons: This Premier raised his salary by 53 percent and now increases the number of MLAs by eight. British Columbians did not ask for that, and this is what this Premier is forcing down their throats.

As far as MLA salaries, I'm sure most members on this side will be forced to buy booster seats. During your booster seat boondoggle, you guys.... You know, that's another way of treating rural British Columbians. Closed-door insiders....

Also, in addition to the cost of requiring the commission to amend the report, the wasted moneys at the

hearings prior to the Premier pulling the plug.... Close to eight new seats will be \$4 million.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. Order.

Member, will you sit down for a moment, please. Members, the member for North Coast has the floor. Continue, Member.

G. Coons: If we just go through a couple more quotes from the Premier about preserving rural representation and what is happening in this Legislature. Back in 1995 in the *Parksville-Qualicum News*: "It's time for politicians to lead by example. I am committed to reducing the number of MLAs and eliminating gold-plated pensions." Another broken promise. "We will reduce the size of the Legislature from 75 to between 50 and 60." Now he's going from 79 to 87.

This Premier — a litany of broken promises to British Columbians, broken promises to the most vulnerable, broken promises to workers, and it's a shame. On November 20, 1995, the Premier said: "I have yet to have any British Columbian tell me that the answer to our problem is more politicians." And what is he doing a mere ten years later? He's adding. He's gerrymandering this House so that they have 87 MLAs in here.

The one key thing that really offends me in this information bulletin is that the amendments preserve rural representation. What I see is the facade of this government being the champions for rural British Columbia. That's false, and we can prove that wherever they go in rural British Columbia. We can prove that with their past.

When we look at the cuts to women's centres, community-based rape crisis centres and, most shamefully, when we look at what's happening on Highway 16 — the highway of tears — this government has failed. This government has failed in its promises to protect young women in the north, especially young first nations women who are disappearing and being murdered along the highway from Prince Rupert to Prince George and down to Kamloops.

[1755]

Deputy Speaker: Member, direct your remarks to Bill 39, please.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. Order.

Continue, Member, on Bill 39, please.

G. Coons: I do take pleasure that I have not been interrupted to stay on it, because I am on it, and I'm being interrupted by my colleagues in the House.

Hon. Speaker, when I look at this government pretending they are the champions of rural British Columbia, when you look at what they've done to community services.... They've closed legal aid offices and welfare

offices. They've forced the closure of local child care resources and referral centres....

Deputy Speaker: Member, on Bill 39, please.

G. Coons: I am, hon. Speaker. I'm talking about maintaining and continuing an effective representation in the Legislature for rural B.C., because it will be diluted and watered down by this bill. When we look at rural British Columbia, as far as seniors services, cuts to long-term care, cuts to home care.... I'm sure the Minister of Health realizes the letters he's getting from throughout British Columbia....

When we look at rural B.C., we look at the Northern Health bus. There is a champion for rural B.C.'s health care, taking a bus from Prince Rupert to Prince George, down to Vancouver and....

Deputy Speaker: Member, your remarks need to be relevant to Bill 39.

G. Coons: Thank you, hon. Speaker.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, Members.

Interjection.

Deputy Speaker: Member.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, Members.
Continue, Member, with relevant remarks on Bill 39.

G. Coons: When we look at preserving effective representation in this Legislature for rural British Columbia, Bill 39 does not cut it. There will be more added, and the math is simple — not very complicated; possibly grade 5 math. You add more urban MLAs in this Legislature, and this House is diluted and representation from representation for rural British Columbia is cut. Now....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Continue, Member, on Bill 39.

G. Coons: In this House today, when we look at Bill 39 and we look at what this government has done to communities across the province, what this government has done to the forest industry in this province, what this government has done to women, children, post-secondary students and the education system....

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

As the minister knows — the EDI in Prince Rupert.... Prince Rupert and the north coast are the most vulnerable district in this province for children in many ways. The early development instrument for

assessing children has seen their physical health and well-being at the fourth most vulnerable; their social competence, the second most vulnerable; their emotional maturity, the third most; language and cognitive development and communication skills, the most vulnerable in this province.

Hon. G. Abbott: Mr Speaker, this member has been cautioned a couple of times by the Chair to address his remarks to Bill 39, and he is, again, deviating from that path.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

I want to remind members on both sides of the House that if you get warned a second time, it will end, you'll sit down, and we'll go to the next speaker.

Member for North Coast continues.

[1800]

G. Coons: Through this session I've had the opportunity to speak to Bill 39 and my opposition to it. I've related, I believe, to Bill 39 and how it dilutes and how it affects rural British Columbia. This government needs to ensure that the rural voice is not diluted by adding more seats in this Legislature.

The Premier's flagrant interference in gerrymandering the commission's work; the addition, at extreme cost, of eight new politicians; and especially the dilution of rural representation are the concerns that we have on this side of the House.

In closing....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members.

Member, just take your seat for a second.

Now, Members on both sides of the House, give an ounce of respect. When somebody is speaking, we all want to hear what's being said from both sides.

Member for North Coast, continue.

G. Coons: Thank you, hon. Speaker. When we look at Bill 39 and the impact that it has on rural British Columbia, we on this side.... We are the champions for rural British Columbia — not the members on the other side, not those members that have looked at rural British Columbia as a privatization model, to drain and strip resources from the parts of the province that supply 75 percent of the wealth.

In this legislation they are going to dilute.... They are going to have rural representation watered down to a point where they can follow through on their mandate. That is not in the best interests of British Columbia.

I have to reiterate that there are three reasons I am opposed to this legislation: again, the flagrant abuse and interference and gerrymandering of the commissioner's report by the Premier and by this government; the extreme cost of adding those eight MLAs — something that British Columbians did not ask for and do

not want; and especially the dilution of rural representation.

On that note, hon. Speaker, I'd like to put forth my strong opposition to this bill. Thank you so much for your patience.

J. Rustad: I'm very pleased to rise to speak in favour of Bill 39. I'd like to start with a comment from the Electoral Boundaries Commission meeting that was held in Prince George. It was a fellow who came up, and he was talking about rural ridings versus urban ridings.

He said: "The difference between a rural riding and urban riding.... You know what? When you have really bad weather, when you have a severe storm come in, you can cross a riding in the lower mainland usually by just a quick walk, a pair of boots and an umbrella. For one of the rural ridings in the north.... It would take you several days, a truck, several tanks of gas and, quite frankly, likely divine intervention to be able to make it across a rural riding."

That's the difference between rural ridings and urban ridings. So the way the Boundaries Commission came out with their interim report.... They came out suggesting that there would be three fewer rural ridings, but in actual fact, it was four fewer rural ridings, because one of the ridings that was a rural riding in the Prince George area was actually made an urban riding. So that voice for rural B.C. was dramatically impacted.

Bill 39 looks at that, takes that situation, and says: "We cannot accept that. We need to make that change." That's what this bill is really all about — protecting those rural ridings.

[1805]

I want to mention that the member for North Coast said that nobody called for more MLAs. Well, I know for a fact that the member for North Coast as well as the member for Skeena attended the meeting in Prince George, and they heard from plenty of people. There were 300 people that came out to that meeting, and they said very clearly: "We understand that there's growth in other areas of the province. We understand that they need representation as well, but don't do it at the expense of rural ridings. If you need to add more MLAs, then add more MLAs — because we understand their need for representation — but don't take them from rural ridings."

That member heard it loud and clear from 300 people. Obviously, he seems to ignore it as he's come out and said that nobody's calling for this.

The North Central Municipal Association made representation. It represents all of the mayors and regional districts across the north from 100 Mile House all the way up to the Yukon border and from the ocean to Alberta. They came out and said the same thing. They said: "You know what? We can't have the loss of rural representation. We understand growth in other areas. Please fix this."

We have listened to those voices, and that's exactly what Bill 39 is. It's listening to the people in rural B.C. and bringing forward the solution that we need to have in this province.

Now the opposition seem to have this problem with adding eight more seats to the Legislature, but I want to ask this of the opposition. Do they truly believe that we should ignore our constitutional obligations? Do they truly believe that the Supreme Court in their rulings around the constitutional organizations is wrong, and that they would know better?

I've heard that they plan to bring forward an amendment to this bill, and that's great. They've spent three and a half hours talking about this bill rather than actually getting to the business of bringing forward some sort of amendment.

I want to say this. The constitutional requirement is that ridings in this province must be plus or minus 25 percent from the population quota in a riding. It has to be within plus or minus 25 percent, and according to the bill that we have, it's unless there are extraordinary circumstances. The commission has been very clear in stating what extraordinary circumstances were in place, and they were very clear in saying that they did not see any particular region of this province having a right to extraordinary circumstances, so they had no option but to do what they did.

I spoke at great length with the commissioners. I had several opportunities to do that, and I understood very clearly the position they were in. It was a tough position, and when the Wood report came out in 1998-1999, there should have been legislation at that time which dealt with this issue, but there wasn't.

When we brought forward the legislation back in 2005, we said to the Boundaries Commission: "We want you to add up to six seats so that the rural representation, particularly in northern B.C., could be maintained." We thought that six seats would be enough to be able to do that. What did the Boundaries Commission say? They said that with six seats there would still be too many ridings that were outside of that 25-percent ratio. Six seats were not enough to be able to meet the constitutional requirements in this province to be able to maintain representation.

Now we're in a situation where we either have to accept their report — we have to say, "Well, you know, you should just add back in the rural seats, but leave the rest as your representation and then ignore the constitutional obligations" — or you have to bring forward what makes sense, which is to be able to add eight seats. That would get the vast majority, all except for the two, and maybe even those two, into that 25-percent ratio and to be able to meet our obligations.

[1810]

Now, I understand that the opposition is unhappy about this, but it's interesting to see their change. When the Boundaries Commission's interim report came out, the Leader of the Opposition said: "We've been very vocal about saying that we shouldn't lose rural representation. It's not often the Premier and I agree, but on this one, we'd like to see the rural seats remain."

We have brought forward a bill that maintains those rural seats, and now we have an opposition that opposes it. You know what? I understand why they

called her the fastest flip-flop in B.C.'s history. In any case, it's very clear....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Continue, Member.

J. Rustad: In Bill 39 the opposition clearly seem to have a total disregard for what their legal requirements are. Quite frankly, I understand why. With the NDP math from the 1990s and the way they do math these days, the math obviously hasn't changed for them.

It's very clear that they would rather just play politics with where those boundaries should go. I look forward to seeing what their amendment is, quite frankly, because I cannot see how an amendment would come forward that would still fall clearly within the constitutional obligations that we have.

I also want to talk a little bit about why representation from rural B.C. can be challenging, and why this bill is so important. I'll just give an example. In my riding the proposed change in the Electoral Boundaries Commission would have taken my riding from being 200 kilometres wide to being close to 400 kilometres wide. It would have taken a big piece of mine and carved it off into another area, but for about a half or a third, it would have meant that they were now in a riding that was twice as wide.

Over the course of the summer we all get a chance to travel around through our ridings and visit people. Over the months of July and August I put on more than 3,000 kilometres each month. That's 100 kilometres a day, day in and day out, travelling around to my riding, visiting my representatives and trying to make sure that I did the best job I possibly could in representing their interests here in Victoria.

If we accept what the Boundaries Commission had said.... It's simple math. In the travel time alone, going back and forth across the riding, I would be severely restricted in the amount of time I would actually be able to have in listening to and meeting my constituents and in representing their issues down here. That type of scenario was simply unacceptable. To be able to have effective representation relative to other ridings, you could not have ridings that were that large.

When I looked across at the riding — I think they called it Northland — it went all the way from the Pacific Ocean to the Alberta border. It would literally take a drive from here to Winnipeg to be able to represent that area. How on earth could that be considered effective representation when you consider some of the other ridings around this province?

There had to be a change. Likely, with the Leader of the Opposition saying she rejected the interim report.... Clearly, from my perspective, I rejected the interim report, and from our amendment bill it's pretty clear that our government rejected the interim report and that loss of representation.

If that interim report were allowed to stand and come here, likely it would have been voted down. You've got a riding, such as that of the member for

Vancouver-Burrard, who has 120,000 constituents. That's way, way over the election quota.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

J. Rustad: To have effective representation, we need to be able to meet that quota. That's why the plus or minus 25 percent is in there.

With the changes that we have brought forward, we haven't said: "A riding boundary is going to be here, or a riding boundary is going to be there." We've said: "You know what? The Electoral Boundaries Commission has that right and ability. They will determine where those boundaries are going to be." What we've said is that in order to be able to protect the rural representation and to meet our obligations under the constitution, this is how it has to be.

The members are saying that maybe we're going to have too many ridings, too many MLAs after this amendment bill that we're putting forward goes through, but I want to make a comment.

[1815]

In Alberta they have 83 MLAs. Currently, in B.C. we have 79. When this goes through and we see the changes come forward by the Electoral Boundaries Commission, we'll have 87. Alberta has three-quarters of the population that we have. If we were to have the same type of representation as they have in Alberta, we'd have 107 or 109 representatives in B.C.

J. McIntyre: Yeah, rep by pop.

J. Rustad: If you wanted to have the same kind of rep by population in B.C. as in Alberta, that's what you would need to have. So it's very clear that adding the....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

J. Rustad: Adding the eight seats that we are proposing to do here is a perfect compromise. It is the right balance. It protects rural representation. It is the right thing to do, and quite frankly, I'm absolutely amazed that this opposition is not supporting rural B.C. by supporting this.

Interjections.

J. Rustad: No. As the member for Peace River North says, they never did really care about rural B.C. anyway, so it's clear they don't in this either. It's all about trying to do some other thing.

I would also say....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Member, just take your seat for a second.

Members on both sides of the House, you'll get your chance to speak. When you get your chance, get up and say it, but the member for Prince George-Omineca has the floor.

Continue, Member.

J. Rustad: The Electoral Boundaries Commission came out and very clearly said why they did what they did. I don't agree with it, but I understand the rationale. I understand the obligations they had. Quite frankly, for this opposition to be rejecting the amendment is actually an attack on the integrity of the Boundaries Commission itself. They were very clear....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.
Continue, Member.

J. Rustad: The issue there, I would think, because of the disruption, is that it obviously hit a chord of truth. The fact of the matter is that the Electoral Boundaries Commission defined why they had to do what they did. We looked at that. We said: "You know what? That makes sense. Okay, we have to actually make a change." So we made a change that is going to allow them to be able to do their work within the constitution, within the rules and confines as they've defined it.

This opposition doesn't seem to respect that one little bit. I have no idea why. You know what? They have their own political reasons for doing it. But it's a shame, when you look at the work and integrity of these individuals and the amount of effort that they put in, that this opposition would disregard it entirely, with their opposition to this bill coming forward.

Representing rural ridings can be a real challenge. There's no question of that. The amount of time and distances, the amount of time away from home.... There were many times when I was down here in the Legislature because I've had to travel the night before, when members from the lower mainland got fogged in that morning. I was able to make it through because I had to travel the night before for connections. That's more time away from family. That's more time away from the constituents. That's being locked up in here more frequently.

You know what? That's the job. I accept that, and I am very honoured to have the opportunity to represent my constituents. But you also have to recognize that rural representation is different from urban representation, and this bill recognizes those principles. It says that we need to be able to maintain those voices and to maintain that representation in rural B.C., but we also need to do it in a way that respects the constitution, that respects the bounds that we are within.

I believe that when you look at the results, particularly of the rally and of the presentations that were

happening in Prince George as well as in Burns Lake.... I had the honour of attending and had an opportunity to speak to both of those. It was very clear what those rural voices said. They said: "Do you know what? In order to be able to have things like the Port of Prince Rupert and the expansion of Port of Prince Rupert, we need to be able to have rural representation."

[1820]

In order to be able to have the \$400 million project and the transmission lines going up Highway 37 that are going to open up a huge opportunity for mining and develop a corner of the province, you need to have rural representation. In order to be able to have things like a cancer clinic go into the city of Prince George that's going to service the entire north and the entire rural area, you need to have effective rural representation.

In order to be able to have things like the expansion of the Prince George Airport, in order to be able to have opportunities that we have seen across the north and across rural areas, you would have to have effective representation that can bring those issues forward and that is able to sit here in Victoria — to be able to work with ministries, with government and with the members in this chamber to make sure that that voice is heard.

We recognize the important roles of rural representation here. We are moving with this bill to protect that. Quite frankly, I invite the opposition to join us in protecting rural representation by supporting this bill and by making sure that we have the correct proportional representation across this province.

I want to add a couple more comments before I wrap up. The bill that this is bringing forward — Bill 39 — fully respects what has been laid out by the Electoral Boundaries Commission. It actually increases the time frame that's required for them to report so that they can effectively do their work.

It will still allow for the opportunity for public input and the process that that has to go through. Once those boundaries come in, it will allow for us to be able to debate it here in the House and to either pass or reject it, as per the process that needs to go forward.

Past commissions that have brought forward changes in this House have been rejected, particularly when they talked about trying to remove representation from rural B.C. But to be able to bring forward the Electoral Boundaries Commission's interim report with some minor changes and bring it into this House.... An outright rejection of that would also be totally and completely unfair to those areas that have been growing in this province.

As a rural representative I want to make sure that my voice as well as my colleagues' voices, on either side of the House, have the ability to be effective. I don't want to see rural representation lost, because that means those issues that are vastly different from urban issues become much more difficult to bring forward.

At the same time, I don't want to say to the member for Vancouver-Burrard, who has 120,000 constituents: "You know what? Seventy thousand of your constituents don't have the same ability for effective representation as some of the other ridings of this province."

We've seen some growth in this province, and quite frankly, I'm proud of that. We have seen growth in this province as opposed to a net migration of people moving out of this province, like we saw in the '90s. We saw that because the economy turned around, because people are working in this province and because there is a positive opportunity to build a future.

For those growing areas of this province I want to see that representation. I want to see them to be able to have that. But at the same time, I don't want to see it at the loss of the rural ridings. That's what this bill speaks to.

The conditions in my area and in ridings around the north.... Back in the '90s we had 17-percent unemployment. Today we have 5-percent unemployment. People are positive about things that are happening in the north, and that representation....

Point of Order

J. Kwan: Point of order.

Mr. Speaker: Member, take your seat.

J. Kwan: I thought I heard you say that we are debating Bill 39.

Mr. Speaker: We are.

J. Kwan: I'm not quite sure that the comments being made by the member for Prince George-Omineca are actually relevant at all to Bill 39.

Mr. Speaker: Members, relevant to the bill. Member, and noting the time.

Debate Continued

J. Rustad: I'll just wrap up with a few comments.

The rationale for my previous comments are quite clear, and that is because it's the need for representation that allows for those kinds of advancements in terms of unemployment numbers, in terms of the job

opportunities that we're seeing in this province. It's through that effective representation and work within government that we've seen these kinds of changes. Bill 39 speaks to how that representation is needed, speaks to those things....

[1825]

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.
Noting the hour again, Member.

J. Rustad: In closing, once again I'm very pleased to be standing here in support of this bill. I think this is the right solution for a problem that the Electoral Boundaries Commission themselves said that they could not solve. There needed to be a political solution to the disparities of representation in rural B.C. This bill brings that forward.

It falls clearly within the constitution. It falls clearly within the requirements that the Electoral Boundaries Commission has. Quite frankly, anything that this opposition brings forward that is different from that.... I question the integrity of why they would bring that forward and challenge the integrity of the commission.

Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for the opportunity to stand and speak about Bill 39 here today.

J. Rustad moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. B. Penner: Mr. Speaker, after that scintillating debate, I move adjournment of the House.

Hon. B. Penner moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Mr. Speaker: This House stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow morning.

The House adjourned at 6:27 p.m.

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