

MPs wrong to attack integrity of panelists

BY DAVID MCGRANE, SASKATOON STARPHOENIX APRIL 19, 2013, A10.

McGrane is an assistant professor of political studies at St. Thomas More College in the University of Saskatchewan.

After a year of debate and public dialogue, the process surrounding the redrawing of Saskatchewan's federal electoral boundaries is coming to a close. At the final parliamentary hearings, Conservative MPs made a number of now-familiar arguments against moving away from our current system of hybrid rural-urban ridings. Two out of the three boundaries commissioners had already heard and dismissed these arguments in their majority report to the House of Commons. Nonetheless, it was entirely appropriate for these MPs to make their concerns known one last time in hopes of possibly changing the commissioners' minds.

However, what was inappropriate was the testimony of several Conservative MPs, who suggested that the process that redrew the ridings was tainted and that the two commissioners who disagreed with their position were biased and partial.

MP Rob Clarke accused commissioners Ronald Mills, a Saskatchewan's Court of Queen's Bench justice, and John Courtney, professor emeritus at the University of Saskatchewan, of "gerrymandering" for changing the demographics of his riding.

MPs David Anderson, Ed Komarnicki and Ray Boughen pointed to the confluence of the commission's final report with the recommendations of early submissions to the commission to argue that Courtney and Mills had preconceived ideas and wilfully ignored during later stages of consultation testimony opposed to urban-only and rural-only ridings.

The most inflammatory comments came from MP Maurice Vellacott, who accused Courtney of "denigrating" the process of drawing up

electoral boundaries. Vellacott stated that he had heard of "conversations" at an orientation for commissioners in Ottawa that confirmed Courtney had settled on his preferred outcome "before a word of testimony was heard." He even went so far as to state that Courtney should have "recused himself" from being a commissioner.

These MPs made such serious allegations without putting forward any supporting evidence aside from hearsay and conjecture.

Such events are truly unfortunate. The system of public hearings by independent boundaries commissions, which was put in place to prevent politicians of the governing party from meddling in drawing up boundaries to advance their own partisan interests, has worked well for all provinces since its inception during 1960s. It has never been the subject of substantial complaints either by citizens or politicians. The Saskatchewan commission has gone through two rounds of intensive, transparent and open consultation. In the first round, it received 200 written submissions that were nearly unanimous in supporting urban-only and rural-only ridings.

The second round took the form of public hearings in which the commissioners heard passionate and reasoned arguments from hundreds of residents on both sides of the debate.

All Saskatchewan residents were able to participate in these consultations, including our MPs. The commission even went as far as to add extra days of hearings in Saskatoon and Regina to accommodate the large number of speakers who signed up.

There is no evidence to suggest that this process ignored important testimony, or that any important voices were not heard. On the contrary, the commission's public consultation allowed for a healthy and vigorous debate regarding these significant changes to Saskatchewan's democracy.

The only instance when the process became tainted was when a series of unfortunate robocalls, made by the Conservative Party, attempted to create widespread panic that the proposed boundaries change would somehow "undermine" Saskatchewan values.

The Conservative members' attack on the integrity of commissioners

Mills and Courtney is particularly offensive. Courtney was appointed by the Commons Speaker, who is a Conservative MP, and Mills was appointed by Saskatchewan's Chief Justice because of their unique qualifications and expertise.

Courtney is an internationally renowned expert on electoral redistricting.

In addition to authoring several books and academic journal articles on the subject, he was sought out by the United Nations to assist with redistricting in Kenya. For his part, Mills has had a distinguished career as a jurist and presided over many court cases in which his partiality was never questioned.

A well-functioning democracy depends on impartial and credible electoral institutions to ensure fair and free elections. For parliamentarians from the governing party to question without proper evidence the legitimacy of a non-partisan and independent electoral boundaries commission is serious business.

Unlike the MPs voicing unsubstantiated claims, neither Mills nor Courtney have a personal stake in the outcome of this process.

They have spent hundreds of hours sifting through testimony to construct the electoral boundaries that they believe are best for improving democratic representation in Saskatchewan.

This unwarranted and politically motivated attack on their reputations will only serve to cast a chill over finding well-qualified individuals to perform such a vital public service in the future.