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Background Brief

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Representing Remote and Rural Ridings

The challenge of providing effective political representation to rural B.C. is addressed in legislation and has been grappled with by the courts, by electoral boundaries commissions, and by local MLAs who represent small communities dispersed throughout geographically vast ridings. The current electoral boundaries commission, due to publish a preliminary report in 2007, will consider how best to balance the representational needs of shrinking northern and rural communities, with those of rapidly expanding southern communities. The commission has already heard from rural presenters who fear their voice in Victoria will be diminished by readjusted electoral boundaries, and from people who believe the densely-populated urban regions are unfairly under-represented.

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LEGAL ISSUES

The *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act* states that districts should be determined by a common quotient, which is determined by dividing the province's population by the number of electoral districts. A district's population is not supposed to deviate from that quotient by more than 25 percent, plus or minus. However, the commission is allowed to make exceptions under "very special circumstances."¹ The act also states the commission should take into account "geographic and demographic considerations, including the sparsity, density or rate of growth of the population of any part of British Columbia and the accessibility, size or physical configuration of any part of British Columbia; [and] the availability of means of communication and transportation between various parts of British Columbia."²

Six electoral districts recommended by the last commission in 1999 had populations below the 25 percent rule. The districts encompassed more than half of the province's total land area, but only about five percent of its total population.³ The previous commission members expressed concern about continuing population drift from the province's north to south. The next commission, they suggested, "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."⁴

According to the current commission, there are now nine ridings with populations that are below the 25 percent variance, and the number of these ridings is expected to increase.⁵ The nine ridings are: Bulkley Valley-Stikine, Cariboo South, Columbia River-Revelstoke, North Coast, Peace River North, Peace River South, Prince George-Mount Robson, Prince George North, and Skeena.⁶

The courts have also grappled with electoral boundaries. In 1991, the Supreme Court of Canada was asked whether variances in the size of voter populations between districts violated the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The majority of the court found the "right to vote enshrined in ... the Charter is not equality of voting power per se, but the right to 'effective representation.'"⁷ Courts in B.C., Alberta, P.E.I., and the Northwest Territories have also ruled on cases involving electoral boundaries.⁸ The last B.C. electoral boundary commissioners wrote that Canadian courts "have established that there are limits to the degree to which a departure is acceptable under the Constitution. At the same time, the courts have endorsed such deviations from the electoral quota as are necessary in order to ensure that voters are effectively represented."⁹

MLAS SERVING RURAL AND REMOTE CONSTITUENCIES

Former Nova Scotia MP Peter McCreath once said that celebrating Canada Day is a very different experience for rural and urban politicians. An urban representative “might have one Canada Day celebration to attend, whereas a rural member may have to drive a couple of hundred miles and sing *O Canada* at least 10 or 15 times during the course of the day,” said McCreath.¹⁰ Legislators who represent communities spread out over vast territories must travel further than those elected by densely-populated urban ridings. They also have to factor in the time necessary to travel between Victoria and their ridings. A presenter to the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform described how one rural B.C. MLA was spread thin attempting to represent 12 communities in a riding without an airport offering scheduled flights.¹¹ MLAs must also contend with the “the obstacles presented by poor roads, extreme winter weather conditions, and the necessity of travelling by boat or [airplane] to reach some communities,” wrote the last B.C. boundaries commission.¹² This situation can raise concerns about quality of representation. As one person submitted to the current commission: “As a general rule, it is fair to say that the farther a representative is from the people represented, the more difficult it is for both the representative and those represented to understand and appreciate each other’s needs and interests.”¹³

Rural and northern MLAs also face a unique challenge in that they may represent communities with few other government offices. The previous boundary commission noted that rural people seemed to require more from their MLAs. “Given the prohibitive time and cost involved in travel to meet with government representatives in Vancouver or Victoria, people explained they must rely on their MLA,” wrote the commission members.¹⁴ “The MLA is one of the few sources of influence that has not been centralized,” said a presenter to the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform.¹⁵

The last electoral boundaries commission also noted northern residents’ sense of alienation from southern political centres, as well as their perception that urban residents set the provincial agenda. “The prospect of losing representation is a serious issue for people in the north,” wrote the commission. “The fact that this possibility is driven, not by a change in circumstances in the north, but by an increase in population in the south, heightens the sense of injustice among northerners.”¹⁶

RESPONSES

The Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform, in its report recommending that B.C. adopt the Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system, said the system would remove existing geographic constraints to effective local representation. “Our electoral districts will grow geographically under BC-STV, but the number of voters per MLA will not change,” stated the assembly’s report.¹⁷ Still, critics argue STV will hurt rural voters because it creates larger ridings.¹⁸ The current boundaries commission has been asked to recommend ridings under both the current electoral system and STV, and British Columbians will vote in 2009 on whether to adopt STV.

The challenge of balancing urban and rural representation is not unique to British Columbia. Ontario recently changed its system for selecting electoral districts in order to maintain northern representation. The province’s ridings were previously identical to federal districts; however, the 2004 federal redistribution reduced the number of northern federal ridings from 11 to 10.¹⁹ In 2005, the province passed legislation that fixed the

number of northern ridings at 11. However, southern ridings reflected the new federal boundaries and their number increased.

Alberta's Electoral Boundaries Commission has used a "matrix" that takes into account various factors which might influence effective representation (e.g. population density, distance to the legislature, the number of local authorities in a division). In 2003, the commission included a "Rural/Urban Ratio" variable as part of the matrix for deciding ridings²⁰

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