



Part 9 – Proposed Single Member Plurality Boundaries

Legend: One dot represents 50 persons



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A. A Description of the SMP Electoral System

British Columbia currently uses the single member plurality (SMP) electoral system, sometimes called the first-past-the-post electoral system. In its present configuration, B.C. is divided into 79 electoral districts, with one candidate to be elected in each district. In an election, the candidate in an electoral district who receives the most votes wins, and the political party that elects the most candidates forms the government. A candidate does not need to receive a majority of votes; it is enough if a candidate receives more votes than any other candidate – a plurality.

The SMP electoral system is a product of the British electoral tradition, and is currently in use across Canada, in the USA, in the United Kingdom, in India and in many other former British colonies.⁵⁴

In this part, we will set out our proposals for the single member plurality electoral districts in British Columbia, and the reasons for them. Before doing so, we will provide a brief description of the process we followed in developing these proposals.

B. The Process

1. The steps we went through in developing our proposed SMP electoral districts

The current 79 electoral districts, when proposed by our predecessor electoral

⁵⁴ For a detailed discussion of the SMP and other electoral systems, see *Electoral Systems, a Comparative Introduction*, by David M. Farrell, Palgrave, New York, NY, 2001.

boundaries commission, included six “very special circumstances” electoral districts with deviations greater than minus 25 percent – five in the North and one in the Kootenays.

We began our analysis by grouping the current 79 electoral districts into our defined regions. See Part 7 of this report for a discussion of the 12 regions we defined.

Then, we went through the entire province on a region-by-region basis, preparing tables showing the deviations from parity for the current 79 electoral districts at the time they were established in 1999 (based on the 1996 census), and showing the deviations from parity for those 79 electoral districts now (based on 2006 census estimates prepared by BC Stats).

That analysis revealed that the number of electoral districts with deviations greater than plus or minus 25 percent had increased from six out of 79 in 1999 to 17 out of 79 now, applying 2006 census data. The number of electoral districts with a population more than 25 percent below the provincial electoral quotient (total provincial population divided by the number of electoral districts) had increased from six to 13 and, in addition, four electoral districts had populations more than 25 percent above the provincial electoral quotient.

Having interpreted the expression “very special” circumstances to mean “exceptional” or “extraordinary,” we concluded that we could not justify proposing 17 electoral districts with deviations exceeding the plus or minus 25 percent statutory limit. Consequently, we realized that we would have to embark on a comprehensive review of the current boundaries.

Proceeding incrementally, we then “rebalanced” the population among the electoral districts within each of our regions, using current population data. By that we mean that we adjusted the current electoral boundaries within a given region, with the goal of having every electoral district within that region have the same population. It soon became apparent that “perfect” rebalancing would come at too high a price. It could only be achieved through major disruptions to important community interests including, for example, dividing small cities and towns between two or more electoral districts. Consequently, our rebalancing of electoral districts within any given region resulted in some population differences among districts.

Using the North as an example, the current eight electoral districts have deviations ranging from minus 29 percent to minus 51 percent, based on the 2006 census. Rebalancing in the North in a way that made sense on the

ground resulted in deviations ranging from minus 30 percent to minus 38 percent.

Even this modified rebalancing exercise left us with 10 of 79 electoral districts outside the plus or minus 25 percent limit – all eight exceeded minus 25 percent, and two electoral districts in the Fraser Valley exceeded plus 25 percent. In addition, rebalancing still resulted in numerous important community interests being violated, some cities being divided among three electoral districts (e.g. Prince George and Kamloops), and several regions having double-digit average deviations.

It became clear that, while rebalancing might work in some regions, it would not be an adequate response in most regions of the province, particularly those regions with the slowest population growth and those regions with the fastest population growth. Consequently, we embarked on a region-by-region analysis.

As we examined the situation facing us in each region, we were guided by our constitutional and legal mandate – every proposed electoral district should be as close as possible to the provincial electoral quotient, except to the extent necessary to deviate from that quotient in order to ensure effective representation.

As we worked our way through each region, we examined a wide variety of factors, including the current number of electoral districts, current and projected population, the distribution of population within each electoral district and within the region as a whole, the history of redistricting in that region, community interests, and transportation and communication challenges.

As you will read in the pages ahead, each region presented a unique set of challenges. In the North, the Cariboo and the Kootenays, we were faced with vast geographical areas, yet with a population that is not keeping pace with the provincial average. The converse exists in the Okanagan, the Lower Mainland and southeastern Vancouver Island, with its many densely populated and rapidly growing urban centres.

With each step, we sought ways to meet our constitutional and legal duty in the least disruptive way possible, such as by reconfiguring current electoral districts. Occasionally, we made adjustments to the outer boundaries of a particular region, if we felt that the current boundaries unnecessarily breached important community interests.

At one point, we grouped the Cariboo-Thompson, Okanagan and Columbia-Kootenay regions into one “mega-region” in the hope (ultimately unsuccessful) that it would give us

greater flexibility to develop boundaries that would enable us to preserve all 15 electoral districts in those regions.

It was an iterative process. We began with 79 electoral districts, and we embraced without qualification our statutory mandate to increase that number up to 85, if we concluded that we should do so. As you will read in the pages ahead, we began in the North, and then moved to the Cariboo-Thompson, Okanagan, Columbia-Kootenay, Fraser Valley, Lower Mainland and, finally, Vancouver Island.

Each step along the way, our primary focus was on individual electoral districts, albeit within a regional context. At each stage, we made decisions about whether the number of electoral districts should be preserved (and, if so, with what boundary changes), or whether there should be an increase or decrease in the number of electoral districts. As we made decisions about reducing the number of electoral districts in some regions, and increasing the number in others, the provincial electoral quotient (total provincial population divided by the number of electoral districts) kept changing, which required an ongoing recalculation of deviations from parity.

Through this iterative process, we were able to ascertain the number of electoral districts that we would be proposing

(81). This gave us the ability to establish the provincial electoral quotient of 50,784 (based on the 2006 census provincial population of 4,113,487) and to calculate each proposed electoral district’s deviation from parity.

In the pages ahead, we begin our description of each regional analysis with a listing of the current 79 electoral districts, and their current deviations. Applying the 2006 census provincial population of 4,113,487, and 79 electoral districts, the provincial electoral quotient is 52,069, which is the figure we used in calculating the current 79 electoral districts’ deviations from parity. We also used this quotient during the rebalancing exercise described above, because we were still dealing with the current 79 electoral districts.

However, when we realized that rebalancing the population within each region’s electoral districts would not be an adequate response to recent population changes across the province, we had to embark on a qualitatively different type of analysis – work our way through the province region-by-region, and make decisions as we went about retaining the same number of electoral districts in a region, or proposing an increase or decrease (and what effect such changes would have on individual districts’ deviations).

In describing our analysis in the pages ahead, we will rely on the provincial electoral quotient derived from 79 electoral districts during our initial discussion of current deviations applicable to the current 79 electoral districts, as well as during our description of the rebalancing exercise (since that exercise assumed 79 electoral districts).

However, when we progress to our description of the analysis of each region's electoral districts, we will rely on 81 districts for ascertaining the provincial electoral quotient and for calculating deviations from it.

You will also see that the number of electoral districts within some of our 12 regions, and the outer boundaries of those regions, have changed as a result of our analysis.

2. Using updated population projections

During the course of our boundary setting process, we received some data from BC Stats (see Appendices O to R) that contained population projections for the proposed electoral districts based on the 2006 census. We then used this data to review the conclusions we had reached about the number and configuration of our proposed electoral districts, always mindful of the cautions we had received from many submitters about the reliability of projections.

The BC Stats projections indicate that some of the proposed electoral districts could be outside the statutory limits by the year 2013, the time of the last election that the proposed electoral districts would apply to if they are accepted by the Legislative Assembly.

Where the BC Stats projections were consistent with the information we had relied upon to reach our conclusions, we felt it appropriate to draw boundaries to avoid proposing an electoral district that would exceed the statutory limits in 2013.

On the other hand, we were not prepared to rely on the BC Stats projections which show a continuing decline in population for the sparsely populated electoral districts, because of the conflicting submissions we received about these areas of the province. For example, despite the apparent trend of a continued decline in population as indicated by the projections, we heard and read about new projects that are underway or being planned, and a recent upswing in real estate activity with an increase in land values – factors which, if sustained, may have a positive impact on population growth. Therefore, we did not consider it prudent to adjust our proposed electoral districts in these areas without dependable data such as that provided by the 2006 census.