

***Submission to the Commission on Electoral Boundaries  
by Hans Connor, Charlottetown, PEI***

Amid the noise and haste of the Proportional Representation movement, a modest proposal from the Commission on Electoral Boundaries has emerged that may be far more significant for PEI politics than any new system or any past electoral changes. That is because it appears, unlike any previous tinkering, to seek fairness and, for this reason, should be embraced by Islanders. Island political parties should also embrace the new boundaries, not just out of a sense of fairness, but also for political advantage.

During most of our political history, the Island's 30 dual ridings served our province well. Each riding had two elected officials covering large areas of each county. This provided a balance between answering to citizens' needs and maintaining a broader perspective on provincial affairs. Following the "Break", when the Island began its transformation from an agrarian arcadia to a modern social welfare state, a riding was added to the Charlottetown area in response to increasing urbanization. Of course, the economy of Prince Edward Island is based on rural industries like farming, fishing and forestry. However, with the transition to modernity, the Garden Province was transformed. The time of hundred-acre farms scattered evenly throughout our three counties has passed in favour of the suburban sub-division and the daily commute.

For many years, though, our electoral boundaries did not reflect the demographic reality of our province. Although it was respectful of our rural roots, our political system was unfair to the bulk of the population living urban lives. The power of the Island's agrarian mythology over our electoral system was broken only by a legal battle in the 1990s that ultimately required amending our political boundaries to reflect the changes in our population. The only problem was that these changes did not go far enough.

The concept of Representation by Population is a fundamental to modern democracy. It is found in both the British parliamentary system and the American republic system. While the pure form of democracy in ancient Athens allowed direct participation in legislative decisions, modern nations are too complex to so engage each citizen. We elect representatives to act on our behalf in legislative assemblies. We agree on an appropriate size for such a forum and we divvy up the membership of the assembly along geographical lines. If fairness is an important element of democracy, then ensuring equality of population within these geographic boundaries is paramount.

Faced with the task upgrading our democracy, Island legislators, unfortunately, balked. Not only did they preserve rural dominance over a majority of city dwellers, but they created problems for their own political parties. While the courts required the Liberal government of the day to make changes to the electoral boundaries to better reflect the democratic concept of Representation

by Population, the government chose to turn the process of electoral reform into a process of small-minded politics. Rather than developing equal ridings, they used the process to preserve existing Liberal strongholds and to gerrymander new districts, dividing traditional Conservative areas into separate districts and uniting traditional Liberal areas.

While having 27 single-representative districts simplified the Island electoral system, other problems resulted. Districts 7, 8, 9, 15, 16 and 20, among others, threw rural and urban areas into one political unit. Unfortunately, for both sets of inhabitants, this meant that there was no unity of interest and thus, inadequate representation. As well, where no unity of interest existed, it was difficult for political parties to find volunteers and generate excitement needed to mount election campaigns. The voter's sense of place, fundamental to political participation, was lost.

The government had outsmarted itself. When the new boundaries were used in the 1996 election, the Liberals lost power. Part of the reason for this involved unpreparedness for the electoral re-distribution. With only 16 ridings prior to 1996, the Liberal Party of PEI had grown into a very centralized organization. In creating 27 new districts, a whole new party infrastructure had to be established. The extreme centralization of power in the PEI Liberal Party in the 1990s combined with the gutting of traditional geographic loyalties and traditional volunteer base in the old dual ridings was too severe for partisan gerrymandering to surmount.

With three elections using the 27 individual district system behind us, the Liberals, and other Island political parties, now have an opportunity to capitalize on the Commission's new proposal. The report of Commissioners McQuaid, Mitchell and Hubley offers a few obvious benefits to Island political parties.

In the first place, the proposed new boundaries inject more fairness into the Island political landscape through increased equity in population representation. Fairness is always good in politics. Our society has constructed laws and procedures to ensure a fair political process as it is believed that a fair process will result in the best government in the short and long terms. The proposed new boundaries are not perfect, but go much further toward equalizing population distribution than any previous configurations and therefore offer the fairest system available. Island political parties, who are strong believers in good government, should find it easy to take a strong moral stance for fairness in Island politics by welcoming the newer, fairer boundaries.

Secondly, if political parties welcome the new boundaries quickly and candidly, they will be in a better position to retool their own internal structures. The switch from the 16 dual ridings to 27 districts meant that more people had to get involved in party processes in order to keep district organizations afloat. Some party loyalists who had worked together were separated and others, accustomed

to leadership roles, had to learn to cooperate. Obviously, witnessed by their election successes, the Island Conservatives adapted to the new boundaries better than the other parties. A party can expend efforts in fighting changes and tinkering with minor details or it can prepare its organization and its volunteers for the new reality in order to put the party on the best possible footing well in advance of the next election.

Finally, the proposal appears to have abandoned the contorted suburban-rural districts mentioned previously as well as the pretense of unity of interest based on county lines. Representative democracy works better where constituents are all interested in the same bases for action and the same results. The Island's county lines are artificial whereas the divisions between our rural and urban settings are all too obvious. The Commissioners seem to be suggesting that rural ridings comprising large geographic areas that may cross county lines allow for unity of interest that suburban-rural hybrids confined to one county do not. Island political parties can easily recognize that representing constituents who have a unified set of expectations is an easier task than representing a socially or geographically divided riding. Moreover, where this unity of interest exists, as it appears to with the new boundaries, developing a coherent party structure and generating interest from voters will become easier. When voters become engaged, political parties will benefit.

Given that electoral adjustment is mandatory by provincial legislation, fighting against it is futile. While some citizens have complained about the proposed changes' shortcomings, there are some attributes that Island political parties can use to their advantage. Between political advantage and the inherent fairness of greater equality of representation, the road ahead for the new electoral boundaries seems obvious. It would be great to see an Island politician seize the opportunity that has been presented.

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