

Sask. big cities need own MPs

By Charles Smith and David McGrane, *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* April 19th, 2012, A7.

Smith and McGrane are assistant professors of political studies at St. Thomas More College.

The Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for Saskatchewan has requested input to guide its deliberations over redrawing the province's electoral map. An important issue on the minds of the commissioners will certainly be whether to continue with hybrid rural-urban ridings in Saskatoon and Regina.

The Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act identifies three criteria to be considered: A similar community of interest and identity, the historical patterns of boundaries and a manageable geographic size in sparsely populated rural and northern areas.

On the first criterion, the hybrid rural-urban boundaries clearly fail. On top of identifying with different communities, residents of Saskatoon and Regina have different interests than fellow constituents in neighbouring towns and rural areas.

The residents of the two large cities are concerned with municipal infrastructure (such as bridges), settling new immigrants, urban sprawl, public transit, homelessness and accommodating a growing off-reserve urban aboriginal population. Rural residents are concerned with agricultural issues, access to information technology, the maintenance of highways, recruiting doctors and building relationships with on-reserve aboriginals.

It is unfair to ask a single MP to represent the interests and identities of such varied constituents. In fact, it is bad for democracy.

To use the example of the Saskatoon Rosetown-Biggart constituency, how can one politician represent the identities and interests of someone living on 20th Street in Saskatoon as well as of a person farming outside Herschel? Asking an MP to perform such a herculean task leads to ineffective representation for both rural and city residents.

It is important to note that such hybrid rural-urban ridings for cities the size of Saskatoon and Regina are unique to Saskatchewan. Indeed, electoral boundaries commissions elsewhere in Canada have tried to avoid having a large number of urban voters share the same riding as rural voters. A look at 12 Canadian cities similar in size to Regina and Saskatoon reveals that none have boundaries divided four ways to ensure that large rural areas are brought into the same riding as urban areas.

In terms of the second criterion laid out in the legislation, it has been the practice in the past four decades to have ridings in Saskatoon and Regina include some rural areas. While hybrid urban ridings may have made sense in the past, urban residents in Saskatchewan now have little knowledge or connection to its rural areas.

Further, there were exclusively urban ridings in Saskatoon and Regina from 1933 to 1966. Given that historical precedent and the current lack of connection between urban residents and rural areas, the boundaries commission would be justified in drawing boundaries contrary to those used during the past 40 years.

A legitimate concern is that the elimination of hybrid urban-rural ridings would result in extremely large rural ridings that are contrary to legislative guidelines.

However, in an era of Skype, Twitter, and smart phones, large rural ridings have become increasingly "manageable" through information technology.

Moreover, there is room to increase the Saskatchewan ridings south of La Ronge (the 55th parallel) that contain no sections of Saskatoon and Regina. Battleford-Lloydminster, Yorkton-Melville, and Souris Moose-Mountain range from 32,887 square kilometres to 40,626 sq. km. The riding of Prince Albert is only 14,872 sq. km.

Currently there are 12 ridings larger than 50,000 sq. km south of the 55th parallel in six provinces. Clearly, electoral commissions in these provinces have not seen rural ridings of this size as unmanageable. In fact, one such riding is Saskatchewan's Cypress-Hills Grasslands, which is 74,840 sq. km. Previous electoral commissions perceived Cypress-Hills Grassland's size to be manageable, and there have been no high-profile complaints from constituents regarding lack of representation.

The commission should create two ridings each exclusively within the city limits of Regina and of Saskatoon. Depending on how the rest of the map is redrawn, the size of remaining ridings neither would be unmanageable nor fall outside the established norm for rural ridings in Canada.

Instead of having MPs whose attention is split between their urban and rural constituents, rural residents would have more MPs exclusively devoted to their concerns than at present. In turn, urban residents would also have MPs who are more focused on their interests and concerns.

In short, a new electoral map will be a win for the city and the country, and improve democratic representation in Saskatchewan.

© Copyright (c) The StarPhoenix