

Redistribution of Seats in the British Columbia Legislature, 1952-1978

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Few things are capable of creating the amount of turmoil that arises in a legislature when constituency boundaries are to be changed. The inevitable extinction or splitting of some existing ridings to reflect shifts in population growth throws into jeopardy the political future of sitting members, who tend to object vociferously at any hint of an erosion of the constituencies that elected them.

Redistribution is never a comfortable time for the government of the day. Alterations of boundaries of opposition-held ridings lead to charges of gerrymandering, no matter how pure a government's intentions. Discontent is observed on both sides of the House among rural members when the number of rural seats is reduced, as is usually the case, to reflect the more rapid growth of urban areas. Conversely, the fact that rural ridings are customarily allowed smaller populations than their urban counterparts is a perennial target for criticism by city members who hold rep by pop dear over all things.

The Canadian House of Commons took steps to alleviate the trauma associated with redistribution by enacting legislation in 1964 to pass on the task to a permanent independent commission, any of whose recommendations could be questioned only at the request of at least ten MPs. British Columbia appointed its first independent commission in 1966, but lacking safeguards to discourage tampering by government, the redistribution that followed bore little resemblance to that recommended by the commission. A subsequent redistribution commission, appointed in 1975, was thrown into limbo by an election being called just as it was about to present its report.

Because of the furor so often associated with the redistribution of seats, governments understandably are reluctant to become involved in the process more often than is absolutely necessary. The BNA Act requires the Parliament of Canada to conduct a redistribution after each decennial census. In British Columbia, where no such rule applies, slightly longer

intervals have customarily passed between redistributions. Since 1941 there have been three reallocations of seats — in 1955, 1966 and 1978.

TABLE 1

Redistribution of Seats in the B.C. Legislature, 1952-1978

	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Multiple-member ridings</i>	<i>Average number registered voters per MLA</i>
1952 election	48	5	16,522
1955 redistribution	52	8	14,973*
1966 Angus commission recommendations	52	0	16,806†
1966 redistribution	55	7	15,890†
1975 Norris commission recommendations	62	12	25,155**
1978 redistribution	57	7	

* based on 1956 election figures

† based on 1966 election figures

** based on 1975 election figures

When the Social Credit party came to power in British Columbia in 1952 the distribution of seats in the forty-eight member legislature had remained unchanged for eleven years. The number of registered voters had very nearly doubled since the redistribution of 1941, increasing from 418,000 to 793,000.¹ By far the greater part of this increase was to be found in the extreme southwestern corner of the province — the “lower mainland”, encompassing Vancouver and the lower Fraser Valley — as the Vancouver press frequently took pains to point out. Editorials complained of growing discrepancies between the voting power of the rural areas and that of the large municipalities. The Vancouver *Province*, noting that the electoral roll in Atlin, geographically the largest constituency in the province, had increased by only 180 voters since 1941 while the suburban riding of Burnaby had grown by 26,000, argued that the traditional overrepresentation of rural areas because of difficulties in access and communication was no longer justified. As a result of the postwar road building program sponsored by the Coalition government, the paper suggested, “the geographic problems which were the basis of boundaries

¹ British Columbia *Statement of Votes*, General Election, 21 October 1941; *Statement of Votes*, General Election, 12 June 1952.

many years ago no longer exist". Consequently a redistribution before the next election was imperative in the name of "decency, justice and practical considerations".² The *Province* expressed the hope that redistribution "would make the legislature represent the people of B.C. instead of a collection of antiquated geographical divisions that have no relation to present concentrations of population".³ The *Vancouver Sun* concurred in these sentiments, and called on the government to establish an independent commission — "a panel of judges, assisted by permanent electoral officials, could undertake it" — suggesting that nothing could be achieved if redistribution were left in the hands of a legislative committee dominated by a government majority.⁴ The metropolitan dailies' demand for redistribution by some reasonably impartial body and for some approximation of representation by population in the redrawing of boundaries was to become increasingly strident during the ensuing years.

The Social Credit government was under pressure as well from the opposition in the legislature to make redistribution a priority. Liberal MLA Edward Kenney said it was imperative for the government to conduct a reallocation of seats before calling another election. The particular example of injustice he chose to point out was the case of the riding of Delta, whose registered voters had tripled in number since the 1941 redistribution.⁵ Victoria riding, with 10,000 fewer voters, elected three members to the legislature to Delta's one. Premier W. A. C. Bennett refused to commit himself and replied that the Coalition government, in which Kenney had been a minister, should have tackled the matter itself.⁶ Any hesitation Bennett may have felt under the circumstances was understandable. The chief effect of any redistribution pretending to be fair would be a significant increase in the number of seats located in the lower mainland at the expense of the vast and sparsely populated hinterlands of the province. The fledgling Social Credit minority government held the slimmest of pluralities in the House — one seat more than the CCF opposition — and only three of the eleven seats in the greater Vancouver area.⁷ The thought of increasing voting power in an apparent CCF stronghold must have appeared somewhat less than palatable to a Premier hold-

² *Vancouver Province*, 27 September 1952, p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 5 December 1952, p. 4.

⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 15 September 1952, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 September 1952, p. 13.

⁷ Five of the remainder were held by the CCF, two by the Progressive Conservative party and one by the Liberal party.

ing such a fragile toehold on power. While Bennett yielded to the growing demand for redistribution by moving the appointment of a special legislative committee in February 1953, he perhaps foresaw that if an election were held later in the year the committee would lack the necessary time to achieve anything before it took place.

The special committee was to comprise ten members, four of them Social Credit, and was directed to make recommendations "as to the desirability of increasing the number of members to be elected to the legislature and as to the distribution of the members amongst the electoral districts of the province".⁸ It was not long in coming to appreciate the enormity of the task set before it. The committee members met twice, then decided it was futile to attempt to bring in recommendations before the end of the legislative session and agreed to recommend to the legislature that a continuing committee be set up to examine distribution and report at the next session of the House.⁹ Two days later Bennett called an election to be held in June.

The second Social Credit administration held a comfortable majority, winning twenty-eight of the forty-eight seats. Inequities in voting power were again seen to be glaringly apparent. Three days after the election the *Province* ran an angry editorial demanding that redistribution be a top priority in the government program. Once again the exaggerated voting strength of rural ridings caused chagrin: "This is not representation by population. It is an utter farce, an absurd distortion of democracy. How can there be fair representation when more than 40,000 voters in Burnaby have no more voice in public affairs than the 1,700 people of Atlin?"¹⁰

The special redistribution committee was re-established in the fall session of 1953¹¹ and again in the spring of 1954¹² but was unable to draw up recommendations before the House adjourned in April for the remainder of the year. Bennett, however, had a suggestion of his own to put forward, and chose a receptive audience before which to make it public. Arriving in August at Fort St. John, in the far north of the province, the Premier announced to appreciative citizens that their town was to be included in a new riding that would be created to meet "the rapid growth and vast potential" of the area north of the Peace River.¹³ Opposi-

⁸ Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, *Journals*, 9 February 1953, pp. 16-17.

⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 23 February 1953, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Vancouver Province*, 12 June 1953, p. 4.

¹¹ *Journals*, 30 September 1953, p. 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19 February 1954, pp. 8-9.

¹³ *Vancouver Sun*, 16 August 1954, p. 1.

tion members on the redistribution committee were outraged. Arthur Turner, a CCF member, labelling Bennett's promise "a direct repudiation of the principle of free all-party parliamentary committees", called for the committee to be disbanded and in its stead a judge appointed to conduct an impartial redistribution study.¹⁴

Turner's proposal failed to receive an enthusiastic reception in the Premier's office. With the commencement of the spring session in 1955 Bennett proposed increasing the number of committee members by one, adding Cyril Shelford to provide the committee for the first time with a clear majority of Social Credit members.¹⁵ The opposition was not amused. The implication was taken that the Premier's motion was intended as a means of pushing through a redistribution settlement that opposition members might find unsatisfactory; it was argued that it was essential for such a committee, if it were to be at all effective, to be non-political in nature.¹⁶ The opposition moved that Shelford's name be deleted from the list of members put forward by Bennett. When that motion met defeat it was moved that Shelford be replaced by Thomas Uphill, the perennial Labour MLA for Fernie. This motion likewise received a predictable reception from the government benches and the committee was set up in accordance with Bennett's wishes.¹⁷ The *Vancouver Sun* saw Bennett's move as being designed to give predominance to rural interests on the committee and chided the Premier for spurning the trend in other jurisdictions towards having redistribution conducted by non-partisan bodies.¹⁸

As it became apparent that the committee was prepared to make its recommendations before the end of the spring session, speculation grew about the nature of the impending proposals, especially in regard to Bennett's promise to split Peace River in two. The *Victoria Daily Colonist* expressed the fear that greater Victoria would lose a seat because, it said, a former Social Credit cabinet minister, Einar Gunderson, had twice been defeated there in attempts to gain a seat in the House.¹⁹ The *Daily Colonist* had reason enough to be anxious, not so much because of the contrariness of Oak Bay voters as because of the fact that Victoria was the one large urban area in B.C. that was significantly overrepresented in the legislature.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 August 1954, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Journals*, 31 January 1955, p. 14.

¹⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 February 1955, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Journals*, 1 February 1955, pp. 20-21.

¹⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 29 January 1955, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 5 March 1955, p. 4.

For years the Vancouver press, when it wasn't bemoaning overrepresentation of the north, had been making rude remarks about privileged Victoria, which elected three members with a considerably smaller population than any of Vancouver's dual-member ridings.²⁰

Victoria's fears turned out to be unfounded, for the present.²¹ In March the redistribution committee reported to the House, recommending that the number of seats be increased from forty-eight to fifty-two by transforming Burnaby, Delta and North Vancouver into dual-member ridings and by dividing the riding of Peace River into two separate electoral districts, North Peace River and South Peace River. Its stated rationale for the latter fulfilment of Premier Bennett's prediction in Fort St. John was "the vast industrial expansion which is opening up hitherto sparsely populated areas of this province". The CCF and Liberal members of the committee announced their resignations from it and voted with the rest of the opposition against the adoption of its report,²² charging that the committee's recommendations were simply planted by Bennett and rammed through by an obliging Social Credit majority.²³

The *Vancouver Sun*, outraged by the contents of the committee's report, was particularly galled by the fact that the already overrepresented north was to be given an extra seat while the city of Vancouver, whose MLAs represented considerably more than the provincial average number of voters, was to be left with its existing number of seats:

You can call it either regional representation or representation of interests as you like. But if the idea were carried to its extreme logical conclusion maybe Vancouver's particular civic interests could as easily be represented by one MLA as by nine or eleven. The principle is contrary to the western liberal-democratic tradition in this province.²⁴

The *Sun* repeated its demand for an independent redistribution commission and called for three seats to be added to Vancouver and one removed from Victoria.²⁵ Bennett replied that Vancouver proper had finished its growth — "all the building lots in Vancouver are sold out."²⁶ Regardless

²⁰ See, for example, *Vancouver Sun*, 17 February 1950, p. 4, and 27 September 1952, p. 4.

²¹ Victoria subsequently lost one of its three seats in the redistribution of 1966.

²² *Journals*, 9 March 1955, pp. 142-44.

²³ *Vancouver Sun*, 15 March 1955, p. 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 March 1955, p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12 March 1955, p. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1955, p. 4.

of where the potential for growth lay in the province, each Vancouver MLA represented an average of 27,460 registered voters; Peace River, which was to have its representation doubled by redistribution, had had 7,586 at the time of the previous election.²⁷ “To accept the present farcical proposal,” declared the *Sun*, “is to countenance a shameless gerrymander.”²⁸ Three days later the redistribution bill passed third reading after an unsuccessful motion by the CCF to have it sent back to committee to be reconsidered.²⁹

The redistribution had been very much a makeshift affair. No attempt had been made to adjust the existing boundaries of constituencies to take account of shifts of population within the different regions of the province, and the imbalance in voting power between urban and rural areas remained essentially unchanged. To deal with underrepresentation of the lower mainland by doubling the representation of the three most populous single-member ridings was simply to shift the burden to other ridings which were almost as large — a crude compromise at best. In justifying the addition of a northern seat on the basis of expected growth, Premier Bennett and the redistribution committee established the curious principle of representation by future population as a principal criterion in the distribution of seats. On that basis the mushrooming suburbs of Vancouver might have been entitled to a dozen MLAs for every one given the north. As it turned out, the predicted surge of population over the Rockies into the Peace River country failed to materialize to any significant degree: eight years after the redistribution, in the 1963 election, the combined total of registered voters in the two ridings of North and South Peace River was 13,269, well below the provincial average of 16,791 per MLA.³⁰ The only plausible argument in favour of Peace River’s double representation lay in the fact that it now unfailingly produced at each election two Social Credit MLAs instead of one. At best, the 1955 redistribution demonstrated the shortcomings of using unreliable projections of population in determining representation; at worst, the *Sun* had not been so far off the mark in pointing to a “shameless gerrymander”.

Resentment at the system of representation surfaced periodically during the following years in the Vancouver press and in statements by the opposition. The NDP placed a resolution calling for redistribution on the order paper in 1962, but the government declined to bring it up for

²⁷ *Statement of Votes*, General Election, 9 June 1953, p. 6.

²⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 12 March 1955, p. 4.

²⁹ *Journals*, 15 March 1955, pp. 182-83.

³⁰ *Statement of Votes*, General Election, 30 September 1963, p. 6.

debate. Developments in Ottawa and Washington in 1964 provided the proponents of redistribution with new incentives. In a series of decisions the U.S. Supreme Court declared its opinion that the principle of representation by population must be paramount in the distribution of seats in state legislatures. Shortly thereafter the Canadian House of Commons passed a bill establishing a permanent independent commission of redistribution and limiting the powers of Parliament to alter its recommendations. The *Sun* praised the federal action and suggested it was time for Premier Bennett to follow suit and make amends for the "farcical redistribution of 1955".³¹

In March 1965 Bennett disclosed plans to reduce the size of the legislature and hinted at plans to redraw constituency boundaries to coincide with those of federal ridings, which were in the process of undergoing redistribution by the permanent commission. Bennett's idea was to provide for a forty-eight member House with two members for each of the twenty-three federal constituencies with the exception of Peace River, to which he proposed to allot four members.³² The *Vancouver Sun* offered cautious support for the plan, suggesting that "superficially the idea has merit, except that it would leave Peace River even more vastly over-represented than it now is".³³ Less enthusiastic was the Social Credit back bench, realizing that conformity to federal boundaries would inevitably mean an erosion of the rural representation which had put most of them in the House. In August Bennett said that the plan to follow federal boundaries had been scrapped and announced the appointment of a royal commission to study redistribution.³⁴ It appeared that the perennial demands by the opposition and press for redistribution by a non-partisan commission had at last been assented to.

The three-member commission was to comprise a retired political scientist, Henry Angus; the chief electoral officer of the province, Frederick Hurley; and the deputy registrar-general of voters, Kenneth Morton. Its terms of reference were more detailed and more restricting than those assigned to the pre-1955 legislative committee. The commission members were to:

1. take into account where feasible historical and regional claims for representation;

³¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 8 February 1964, p. 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 26 March 1965, p. 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29 March 1965, p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6 August 1965, p. 16.

2. make their recommendations on the basis
 - (a) that no electoral district comprise fewer than 7,500 registered voters having regard to present population and apparent population trends to the year 1975, and
 - (b) that the Legislative Assembly comprise not fewer than forty-eight nor more than fifty-two members
 and
3. give consideration to the provision of multiple-member ridings of two members each in the metropolitan areas of Victoria and Vancouver.³⁵

These conditions placed an awkward web of constraints on the commission. The inclusion of "historical and regional claims" as a criterion was an obvious device to ensure continued protection of sparsely populated rural ridings. Yet the direction that there be no increase in the existing number of seats meant that if the commission were to recognize gross underrepresentation of the lower mainland by adding seats in that area, other parts of the province must sacrifice an equivalent number of seats. The logical ridings to disappear, being those which were most clearly overrepresented, happened also to be the ones with the most strongly felt historical and regional claims.

The provision that no riding have fewer than 7,500 voters appeared to be designed to mollify to a small degree those critics who tended to become apoplectic at any mention of Atlin, whose MLA had been elected by 1,008 voters in the 1963 election, and a dozen or so other ridings with populations very much below the provincial average. The compromise was offset by the direction that population projections for the following decade be considered; Bennett apparently continued to be under the impression that the north was ever on the verge of experiencing a population explosion.

The existence of multiple-member ridings in B.C. had been a bone of contention for a number of years. The Vancouver press had periodically run editorials calling for their abolition.³⁶ In 1954 the legislative committee on redistribution had initially agreed to dispense with them, reasoning that voters in such ridings had a disproportionate voice, until Social Credit opposition led it to abandon the idea.³⁷

³⁵ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Redefinition of Electoral Districts* (hereafter referred to as "Angus Report") (Victoria, 1966), p. 5.

³⁶ See, for example, *Vancouver Province*, 23 January 1952, p. 4, and *Vancouver Sun*, 12 March 1955, p. 4.

³⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 12 January 1954, p. 4.

The Angus commission spent three months travelling through the province, holding thirty-four public hearings before drawing up its report, which was presented in January 1966. Predictably, the commission found that representations by groups and individuals in rural areas expressed certain reservations regarding the desirability of representation by population. Their reasons were varied and imaginative. The commission found the strong demand for disproportionate representation to result chiefly from "fear of the dominance of the province by the lower mainland, and especially by Vancouver. The extraordinary belief seemed to exist that the people of the lower mainland were economic parasites, producing little wealth themselves, and intent on exploiting the people in the 'underdeveloped' areas."³⁸ Little consciousness was found in rural areas of the relationship of numbers of voters to political power. Rather, stress was laid on the role of the MLA as a government agent who could service his riding efficiently and as an ombudsman who would get the ear of the government when constituents felt hard done by.³⁹

The Social Credit MLA for Skeena, Bill Murray, told the commission that the principle of representation by population was "ridiculous in the extreme" and called it a myth that was "primarily a product of the powerful and vociferous metropolitan press that dominates the public mind".⁴⁰ The commission's findings did not appear to refute Murray's charge. It found that "in the underrepresented electoral districts there were very few complaints by voters that they were being denied a basic right of citizenship".⁴¹ Instead, equality in the value of votes was subordinated to the need to have vigorous spokesmen for the interests of municipalities rather than groups of people.⁴²

The commissioners found themselves reluctant to accept the frequently expressed concept of the MLA as ombudsman or government agent rather than as an embodiment of political power. They "persisted in presuming that every voter wants as much political power as possible and is not willing to forego his fair share of power unless there are valid reasons for the sacrifice".⁴³ As for historic and regional claims to special consideration for certain areas on grounds of difficulties in access and communications, the desirability of keeping municipalities intact, and ease of servicing a con-

³⁸ Angus Report, p. 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 December 1965, p. 4.

⁴¹ Angus Report, p. 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

stituency by an MLA, the commission concluded that while a certain validity existed in each, "the proper limits are much narrower than those that have usually been claimed".⁴⁴ However, it singled out the northern half of the province as having a particular need for extra representation, "based not so much on the vast size of the region as on the great diversity of interests and on the difficulty of communication".⁴⁵

The commission concluded that it would be unrealistic to define "urban" and "rural" areas and predetermine a ratio between the numbers of voters in each type of riding, as had been attempted in other provinces. Instead it identified nine regions to be considered separately: the Kootenays; the Okanagan; the west central region; the north; Mackenzie and northern Vancouver Island; greater Victoria; the coast and north Vancouver; the lower mainland outside greater Vancouver; and greater Vancouver itself. It recommended that seven ridings be added to the lower mainland, pointing out that even with this addition the lower mainland would have five fewer ridings than would be justified on the basis of representation by population. Consequently the remainder of the province was to have five more ridings — "more than 81,000 phantom voters" — than it was entitled to.⁴⁶

The commission recommended an end to multiple-member ridings. It granted some plausibility to the argument that having two or three members might help preserve the unity of an area, but said that the argument that ridings should have more than one member to maximize their chances of obtaining a cabinet minister or at least government party representation was "an abdication of political responsibility in favour of local caution". It was more convinced by arguments that multiple-member ridings tended to overwhelm important minorities and that weak candidates were encouraged to ride to victory by virtue of association with more meritorious running mates.⁴⁷ Finally, the great majority of submissions touching on the matter had opposed the retention of such ridings. Kenneth Morton filed a dissenting report on the issue, suggesting that section 3 of the terms of reference — "give consideration to the provision of multiple-member ridings" — implied that their retention was mandatory. He did not, however, offer any explanation as to why it was mandatory, except to say that other people had suggested it was.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42.

The Angus report was tabled in the legislature at the end of January 1966.⁴⁹ The official opposition, the New Democratic Party, indicated satisfaction and the party caucus gave the report its unqualified endorsement in the House.⁵⁰ The *Vancouver Sun* expressed cautious approval: while the centre and north of the province were overrepresented, the report was at least “a beginning”.⁵¹ The government back bench was loath to share in the ebullient mood; more precisely, several of its members were dismayed and angry. Eight Social Credit members spoke in the House against the report and others indicated disapproval.⁵² It was attacked both for the increase in ridings in the lower mainland at the expense of rural areas and for the recommendation that multiple-member ridings be phased out. Bennett was faced with the possibility of a major revolt in his ranks. If all the Social Credit members opposing the report were to vote against a bill implementing its recommendations it could be defeated.

The Premier's solution to the dilemma became apparent on February 15, when the bill to effect redistribution was introduced in the House.⁵³ To placate MLAs from the north, he proposed restoring the two northern seats — Atlin and North Peace River — that the Angus commission would have eliminated. In addition the bill called for the retention of all existing multiple-member seats and the creation of two more besides. Not only had a major part of the commission's recommendations been rejected, but Bennett's bill ignored the very terms of reference under which the commission had been required to act: the fifty-four seats established by the bill were two more than the maximum the commission had been permitted to recommend. Bennett's defence of his tampering with the report to produce the extra northern seats was disarmingly simple: “The government is not going to be a party to destroying the constitutional representation of the original settlers or the native Indians.”⁵⁴ And to order a transition to single-member ridings in Vancouver would represent a regression to the ward system, he explained.⁵⁵

Predictably, Bennett's actions inspired a major confrontation in the House. NDP leader Robert Strachan opined that the bill had been

⁴⁹ *Journals*, 29 January 1966.

⁵⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 3 February 1966, p. 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29 January 1966, p. 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3 February 1966, p. 10; 9 February 1966, p. 13.

⁵³ *Journals*, 15 February 1966, p. 52.

⁵⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 16 February 1966, p. 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 February 1966, p. 20.

“written by two people — Gerry and Mander”. Liberal leader Ray Perrault labelled it “political bossism of the worst kind”.⁵⁶ The *Sun* declared that the reversion to multiple-member ridings in the metropolitan areas “smacks of a gerrymander to protect weak Socred candidates who would find it difficult or impossible to win office without riding on someone else’s coat-tails”.⁵⁷ Bennett’s scheme pacified the majority of the back bench dissenters. However, Social Credit MLAs from the Kootenays, where three seats would disappear if the Angus recommendations were followed, took umbrage at the fact that they had been left out of the deal.

When the motion for second reading of Bill 42 was called, Arvid Lundell and Donald Robinson, whose seats were to be obliterated, and James Chabot, whose riding was to be merged with two opposition-held areas, bolted and voted with the opposition.⁵⁸ It was the first time since Social Credit had taken power in 1952 that more than two government members had defected on a bill. Meanwhile Frank Calder, the NDP member for Atlin, which the Angus commission would have shuffled into extinction, succeeded in finding aspects of the bill which convinced him of the merit of Bennett’s alterations and voted with the government.

A final kick was taken at the report of the commission three days later when Premier Bennett, admitting the injustice that had been suffered by the Kootenays, moved an amendment to add yet another seat by dividing Columbia River in two.⁵⁹ The government benches were once more happy, and no Socreds dissented when the redistribution bill came up for third reading.⁶⁰

Despite Bennett’s intervention the Angus recommendations remained sufficiently intact that the redistribution brought the province considerably closer to a semblance of representation by population than it had been during the previous twenty-five years. But the independence of the commission had been for naught. While Bennett had indicated he was prepared to have non-partisan redistributions in principle, when it came to the point the temptation to intervene had proved irresistible. Quite apart from the immediate threat posed by back bench dissension was the fact that the rural mainland had provided a fairly solid base of Social Credit support since the party had first become a political force in British

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16 February 1966, p. 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 17 February 1966, p. 4.

⁵⁸ *Journals*, 8 March 1966, pp. 111-12.

⁵⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 12 March 1966, p. 13.

⁶⁰ *Journals*, 21 March 1966, p. 156.

Columbia. Of fifteen ridings that had unfailingly elected Social Credit members in every election since 1952 (or since their inception, in the case of North and South Peace River), thirteen were located in the vast but lightly populated areas east and north of the lower mainland. The NDP held four safe seats in the same area, and three of them — Cranbrook, Grand Forks-Greenwood and Kaslo — were disintegrated in the redistribution. The Social Credit party, being the chief beneficiary of exaggerated rural strength in the legislature, stood to lose the most by any erosion of that strength, as Bennett was well aware.

The rejection of the commission's recommendation that an end be put to multiple-member ridings proved beneficial to the Social Credit party in the election that followed in 1969. In the dual-member constituency of Vancouver Centre an NDP candidate led by a significant margin — 471 votes — in one of the single-member ridings the commission would have created, but the government party swept both seats because of its strength in the other half.⁶¹ A similar situation occurred in Vancouver-Burrard, where the NDP leader, Tom Berger, went down to defeat. Had the Angus recommendations been followed in their entirety, the Social Credit party would have won four fewer seats and the NDP one more than they did in the 1969 election. This fact was of little consequence to the formation of the government in 1969 as Bennett held a substantial majority; had the results of the election been close, however, the government's handling of the 1966 redistribution might well have meant the difference between staying in power and losing to the New Democratic Party.

Perhaps in an attempt to mollify the outraged opposition after reshaping the Angus commission recommendations, Premier Bennett promised the House that another redistribution would be conducted in five years' time.⁶² Reminded of his words in 1971, Bennett declined the invitation to make good his commitment.⁶³ A year and a half later he was deprived of a further opportunity to do so when the Social Credit party's twenty-year term in office came to an end. Voting statistics in the 1972 election demonstrated that underrepresentation of the lower mainland was becoming increasingly exaggerated following the mushrooming of Vancouver's commuter suburbs. During the six years since the 1966 redistribution the number of registered voters in the province had increased by over 50 per cent; the eight ridings bordering the Fraser River in the lower valley

⁶¹ *Statement of Votes, General Election, 27 August 1969.*

⁶² *Victoria Times*, 9 March 1966, p. 1.

⁶³ *Vancouver Sun*, 31 March 1971, p. 20.

had grown at almost twice the provincial rate, very nearly doubling their number of voters in the space of two parliaments.

After three years in office the NDP government began to set in motion the machinery of redistribution to enable the electoral map to be redrawn before the next election. The commission appointed in July 1975 was to be chaired by a former judge of the B.C. appeal court, T. G. Norris; the other members were Deputy Provincial Secretary Lawrie Wallace and a professor of linguistics at the University of British Columbia, Fred Bowers. The terms of reference under which it was to conduct its inquiry were basically identical to those set for the Angus commission, except that no directive was given regarding minimum acceptable populations of ridings and the commission was to be permitted to increase the size of the legislature: there were to be neither fewer than fifty-five nor more than sixty-two members.⁶⁴

Like its predecessor, the Norris commission travelled about the province listening to patient explanations about the need of the Chetwynd cattleman to have six times the voting power of the Burnaby lineman and as to why Smithers might feel more comfortable sharing a riding with Burns Lake than with Terrace. The commission came to the conclusion that it was "not reasonable in this fast-growing province to rely on the principle of representation by population".⁶⁵ Instead, it adopted a mean figure of 40,000 people per member plus or minus 40 per cent,⁶⁶ a considerably wider margin than the 25 per cent leeway allowed to the federal redistribution commission, but a closer approximation to representation by population than the guidelines suggested to the Angus commission a decade before.

In seeking a more equitable balance of representation between urban and rural areas the commission took particular notice of the Dauer-Kelsay index, a system which seeks to determine the minimal number of voters needed to elect a majority in a legislature — in B.C., the electorate in the twenty-eight least populous ridings — expressed as a percentage of the total electoral roll.⁶⁷ The closer the index is to 50, the more equitable the distribution of voters is and the less likelihood there is of a party winning a majority of seats with fewer overall votes than another party. Employ-

⁶⁴ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Redefinition of Electoral Districts under the Public Inquiries Act, British Columbia* (hereafter referred to as "Norris Report") (Vancouver, 1975), p. i.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

ment of the Dauer-Kelsay index results in less emphasis being placed on the disparity between the single most populated and least populated ridings and more on the smaller districts as a group. Vancouver editorial writers for decades have found an outlet for their dudgeon in heaping abuse on Atlin, whose population has never compared very favourably with that of heavily populated ridings such as Delta and Coquitlam, but Atlin is an anomaly in that its population has always been considerably smaller than that of other rural ridings that have tended to be incriminated by its example. The Dauer-Kelsay index provides editorial writers with a means of venting their rage at rural ridings as a group instead of simply at isolated instances of overrepresentation.

TABLE 2

Dauer-Kelsay Index as an Indicator of Effect of Redistribution on Rural Overrepresentation in B.C., 1952-1975

<i>Election</i>	<i>D-K Index</i>	<i>Election</i>	<i>D-K Index</i>	<i>Election</i>	<i>D-K Index</i>
1952	24.76	1960	26.22	1969	39.08
1953	24.89	1963	26.96	1972	37.78
—1955 redistribution—		—1966 redistribution—		1975	35.92
1956	26.85	1966	39.70	Norris recommendations	43.12

SOURCE: *Statement of Votes*, various elections.

Had the recommendations of the 1966 commission been implemented, a Dauer-Kelsay index of 43.2 would have resulted. While Bennett's addition of three rural seats reduced it to 39.7 in the 1966 election, the figure nevertheless represented a marked improvement over the situation in 1963, when a majority government could theoretically have been elected by one-quarter of the electorate. By contrast, the 1955 redistribution had left the imbalance in voting power between urban and rural areas practically unaltered.

The Norris commission sought to achieve a Dauer-Kelsay index comparable to that arrived at by the Angus commission, and did so by significantly increasing the representation of the lower mainland. In recommending the maximum number of seats allowed by its terms of reference, the commission allotted five of the seven added seats to the Fraser Valley and another to the greater Vancouver area. Additional seats were recommended for northern Vancouver Island and Kamloops, while the Kootenai

nays were to be required to sacrifice the extra seat given them by Bennett in 1966. The north was to retain its seven seats by virtue of the fact that the merging of Atlin with parts of North Peace River and Omineca into the single massive riding of Atlin-Northland was to be balanced by the division of Fort George into two ridings.⁶⁸

The Norris commission generally followed the pattern set by its predecessor in its attempt to find a suitable compromise between urban demands for representation by population and rural demands for extra representation because of their "special needs". On one point, however, it was at direct odds with the Angus commission: whereas the latter had recommended an end to multiple-member ridings, the Norris commission proposed a significant increase in their number — from seven to twelve. No reasons were given beyond the suggestion that "each riding should be dealt with on its own merits" and the statement that several opinions at the public hearings had favoured multiple-member ridings.⁶⁹ An increase in the number of multiple-member ridings in B.C. would have been in sharp contrast to the general trend in the rest of the country. Twenty-five years ago eight of the ten provinces contained constituencies which elected more than one member each; since that time all have abandoned the system entirely except B.C., Nova Scotia, where three dual-member ridings remain, and Prince Edward Island, where each constituency elects one assemblyman and one councillor.⁷⁰

Like its predecessor, the Norris commission was tripped up in the end by politics. In 1975 it was not a case of recommendations being considered and rejected but rather one of recommendations not being considered at all. Five days before the Norris report was due Premier David Barrett called a snap election, the result of which was the return to power of the Social Credit party, now under the leadership of W. R. Bennett, son of the former Premier. Eight days after the election the Norris report was made public by the outgoing Provincial Secretary.⁷¹

Bennett said he was reluctant to accept the findings of the report with the next election three or four years away.⁷² Later he announced that an electoral reform commission would be appointed to study redistribution along with campaign spending, party funding and alternative voting

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷⁰ *The Canadian Parliamentary Guide, 1952* (Ottawa, 1952); *The Canadian Parliamentary Guide, 1977* (Ottawa, 1977).

⁷¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 20 December 1975, p. 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 22 December 1975, p. 1.

methods, with legislation to be brought forward before the next election.⁷³ In January 1978 retired provincial court judge Larry Eckardt was chosen to be the one-man commission. In announcing the appointment Bennett suggested the Norris commission recommendations would no longer be useful because of the availability of the 1976 census figures.⁷⁴

Varying growth patterns in different areas make an equitable distribution of population among constituencies impossible to attain in any lasting manner, and discrepancies are exaggerated when outdated population figures are used as a basis for redistribution, as is usually the case. By the time the first post-redistribution election takes place some ridings may be 50 per cent larger than the population used to calculate their representation while others have not grown at all. The 1976 federal redistribution commission for B.C. relied on 1971 census figures and was not permitted to consider the relative rate of growth of population in the various regions of the province.⁷⁵ But British Columbia's population increased by 12.9 per cent — twice the national rate — between 1971 and 1976. The population of the central Fraser Valley was 51.4 per cent larger in 1976 than five years before; by way of contrast the Peace River-Liard region had grown by only 1.9 per cent and the population of the city of Vancouver had shrunk by 3.8 per cent.⁷⁶ Consequently the balance of voting power purported to be achieved by the federal redistribution was five years out of date and by no means even. In 1966 the Angus commission relied on 1961 census figures and voters' lists from the 1963 election; it declined to refer to population estimates, declaring that it could not undertake to predict the rate of growth in all districts and that "it would be unfair to give to some advantages not accorded to others".⁷⁷ The Norris commission, on the other hand, used 1975 population estimates in conjunction with 1971 census figures and 1972 voters' lists. The use of population estimates and projections tends to militate against disparities likely to result from shifts in population, although population predictions often tend not to be reliable, as W. A. C. Bennett apparently discovered in the case of Peace River after 1955. Also, it is arguable that it is undemocratic to allot representation to voters who do not yet exist.

⁷³ *Vancouver Province*, 25 February 1976, p. 2.

⁷⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 13 January 1978, p. E7.

⁷⁵ *Report of the Electoral Boundaries Commission for British Columbia, 1976*, pp. 2-3.

⁷⁶ *Canada Census, Final Population Counts 1976 Census for Census Divisions and Subdivisions British Columbia and Yukon*.

⁷⁷ *Angus Report*, p. 23.

A comparison of numbers of votes cast in elections does not necessarily provide an accurate reflection of inequities in representation between ridings. The ratio of registered voters to population tends to be significantly lower in low-income and rural areas than is the case in affluent, urban districts. In the 1963 B.C. election, for example, the provincial average ratio of registered voters to population was 54 per cent, varying from 35 per cent in rural Skeena to 66 per cent in Vancouver-Point Grey and 68 per cent in Oak Bay. The 60.4 per cent registered to vote in greater Vancouver and Victoria contrasted sharply with the 48.3 per cent average in the rest of the province.⁷⁸ Ridings which appear to be grossly overrepresented when election results are published may not be so in terms of population; thus in the above example Skeena, with barely more than half the number of registered voters of Oak Bay, in fact had a larger population than the urban riding. Conversely an attempt to equalize representation in terms of registered voters would tend to result in an underrepresentation of rural ridings in regard to population. The federal commission is required to consider only population figures in its determinations. Provincially it is simpler to use existing voters' lists rather than rely on uncertain population estimates. The Angus and Norris commissions looked at both sets of figures, but neither made it clear which figures were given priority in arriving at a redistribution. The terms of reference of the Angus commission required it to see that no electoral district should comprise fewer than 7,500 registered voters; the quota of 40,000 plus or minus 40 per cent established by the Norris commission was derived by dividing the population of the province by the number of seats.

Federally, overrepresentation of rural areas since Confederation has been a "well established convention of Canadian political life, accepted as part of the unchangeable order by almost all members of Parliament, although acknowledged reluctantly by some".⁷⁹ Acceptance of the above principle gives rise to three considerations: what, if any, criteria may be followed in determining which areas should be overrepresented; what limits, if any, should be placed on the degree of overrepresentation allowed in individual cases; and what constraints should be sought to dissuade governing parties from manipulating redistribution to their own advantage. John A. Macdonald, on introducing the Representation Act of 1872, said that "while the principle of population was considered to a very great extent, other considerations were also held to have weight; so that dif-

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁷⁹ T. H. Qualter, "Representation by Population: A Comparative Study," in *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* XXXIII: 252.

ferent interests, classes and localities should be represented, that the principle of numbers should not be the only one".⁸⁰ "Other considerations" proved to be sufficiently vague to allow Macdonald to engage in a bit of unsubtle playing with boundaries. As Norman Ward describes it, "the tampering was done with some hesitation and pretence of principle in 1872, with a gay abandon in 1882, and with dignity and persistence in 1892".⁸¹

The machinery of federal redistribution has since evolved to a stage where it does not lend itself to quite the same opportunities for mischief. The recommendations of the federal boundaries commission, originally established in 1964, may only be debated in the House of Commons if at least ten MPs object to a proposed map, and rural overrepresentation has been subjected to certain limits by the provision that no constituency's population may vary more than 25 per cent from the quota set for the province in which it is situated.

The "other considerations" cited by Macdonald defy legislative definition; they tend to be abstract, subjective and immeasurable. The Norris commission when it held public hearings in 1975 heard every imaginable reason why sparsely populated regions should receive special consideration. Among the factors the commissioners were told to bear in mind were: submersion of rural interests by massive urban populations — "if they get more and more say, they're going to get more and more economic benefits, political benefits and social benefits because the ones that are heard are the ones that get the action . . . the fear of all northern people is that we are dominated by the large population in the south"⁸²; productivity of resource-rich areas — "the tremendous economic contribution our basic resources and the development thereof provide to the province as a whole",⁸³ "one person working in the north keeps five or six working in the lower mainland"⁸⁴; and future growth — "if the future is in the north, and I believe it is, then those who live here should have a say in how that development is done".⁸⁵

⁸⁰ *The Debates of the House of Commons of Canada, 1872*, p. 926, quoted in Norman Ward, *The Canadian House of Commons: Representation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), p. 30.

⁸¹ Ward, *The Canadian House of Commons*, p. 27.

⁸² *Provincial Redistribution Commission*, transcripts of hearings, Burns Lake, 9 September 1975, pp. 11, 16.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Fort St. John, 23 September 1975, p. 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Burns Lake, 9 September 1975, p. 16.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Terrace, 9 September 1975, p. 10.

More cogent were arguments based on the difficulty in access and communication in large ridings and the diversity of interests to be represented. However, other submissions provided forceful rebuttals to these particular points. The leader of the Liberal party, David Anderson, suggested that MLAs and candidates for election in urban ridings faced difficulties in communication just as great as those of their rural counterparts:

There are few non-urban constituencies in B.C. where a major percentage of the electorate is spread out. Most rural constituencies are essentially a series of small communities in which the logging operators — the sawmill — may be located. Contrary to public belief, under these circumstances the rural member has an easier job than the urban member. Perhaps the best illustration of this can be obtained by a comparison of the two by-elections held in B.C. since the last provincial election. In the South Okanagan by-election the media was essentially within that constituency. The newspapers served that area. The television served that area. The radio stations served that area. You went out in the street and you ran into the electors of that constituency. So the candidates could contact voters a great deal easier than in North Vancouver, where the media coverage not only covered North Vancouver-Capilano in that by-election but a couple of dozen other constituencies as well. Advertising, exposure and contact was very much a hit-or-miss proposition and much more expensive.⁸⁶

Other submissions suggested that improved road and air travel had greatly increased the accessibility of remote areas in large ridings.

A brief from a former candidate in an urban riding, Peter Pearse, discussed the frequent complaint that MLAs representing physically large ridings face difficulty representing the diverse interests involved:

This argument, it seems to me, is based on the assumption that the diversity of interests of the population is a function of its geographical dispersion. I strongly suspect that that is generally false. I suspect that the diversity of economic interests and the variation in sociological circumstances of the voters in most of the constituencies in the densely populated areas is greater and more complicated than in the sparsely populated areas of the province. I have been a candidate in one of the large Vancouver ridings in which the range of occupational dependency, income, ethnic background and other circumstances of the voters could hardly be more diverse, and it is extremely difficult to appreciate on the part of one candidate.⁸⁷

In large part arguments for rural overrepresentation stem from a conception of the MLA as something other than an embodiment of voting power; rather, he is viewed as some sort of ombudsman or government

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Victoria, 30 September 1975, pp. 21-22.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Prince Rupert, 10 September 1975, afternoon sitting, p. 2.

agent. This idea is premised on the notion that the primary role of the MLA is to hear complaints and to provide information to constituents rather than to exercise a vote in the legislature on their behalf. A former Social Credit MLA for the vast riding of Omenica gave an illustration of this viewpoint:

... in most of these areas there is no town mayor or alderman who people can turn to for help. There are also no government agents, government offices or welfare offices. So all of these problems fall on the member, and the type of questions you get asked is surprising. One time I was asked to fire the priest because a fellow didn't think he was doing a good job. This is the type of thing you run into, and the thousands of welfare cases and old-age pension forms which they want assistance to fill out, and a thousand other things that a city member doesn't run into.⁸⁸

The ability of an MLA to "service" his riding was stressed time and time again. While constituency work may help to maintain the visibility and popularity of the member, his primary function in the democratic system must be as the voice of his constituents in the legislature. Where access to information and services is primitive it is the role of the government, not the MLA, to remedy the situation by providing agents and offices where necessary. If anything, the ability of the representative to serve the day-to-day needs of constituents diminishes as the functions of government grow more complex, legislative sessions grow longer and committee work increases. The MLA quoted above, Cyril Shelford, re-elected in 1975 after spending three years out of office, spent the first nine months of 1977 in Victoria in attendance at the legislative session and two of the remaining three travelling with a committee investigating food prices. Consequently any time remaining to him to hear pleas concerning the competence of priests in his riding must have been minimal indeed.

Arguments for overrepresentation of rural areas tend to result from misconceptions of the role of elected representatives or to be based on "special needs" whose importance is exaggerated. Traditionally, conservative governments have acquiesced to such arguments; conservative parties tend to be rural-based and to benefit by weighting voting strength towards rural regions, as was the case with the pre-1972 Social Credit party in B.C. The past two and a half decades have seen increasing pressure put on the provincial government to minimize disparities in voting power among ridings and to allow the redistribution of seats to be conducted in a relatively non-partisan manner. During the period under discussion the principle of having redistribution arranged by independent bodies came to be accepted,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Terrace, 9 September 1975, p. 2.

but only one of the two commissions appointed saw its recommendations ever reach the legislature, and these were altered in such a partisan way as to negate the commission's *raison d'être*. A third commission, appointed in 1978, was compromised to a degree from the start by the fact that its sole commissioner had at one time been an election candidate for the government party.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ The interim report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform, tabled in the House on 20 June 1978, recommended that the number of seats in the B.C. legislature be increased from 55 to 57. Three seats were added to the lower mainland outside Vancouver, one to northern Vancouver Island and one to the north by dividing Fort George. Eckardt rejected the Norris commission's proposal that Atlin be merged with North Peace River. While northern representation was increased, the city of Vancouver lost two seats as a result of the obliteration of Vancouver-Burrard, on the basis that such a reduction would bring Vancouver closer to the provincial average of 44,000 people per MLA. In the Kootenays, Norris had recommended that Columbia River be deleted; Eckardt instead recommended the absorption of Revelstoke-Slocan into adjacent ridings. The latter had been held by the NDP since its creation in 1966, the former by the Social Credit party.

On the question of dual-member ridings the commission, while "inclined to favour the single member concept", recommended the continued existence of dual-member ridings for the time being and added Surrey to their number.

The commission sought where feasible to approximate the provincial average population of 44,000 per member, based on 1976 census estimates. In the result, the populations of proposed ridings varied from 5,043 to 80,034 per seat, as compared to a spread in the Norris proposals from 13,580 to 55,990.

The official opposition, incensed by the fact that three relatively safe NDP seats had been wiped out, said that "obvious gerrymandering" had taken place. The charge was made that carefully manipulated alterations of boundaries would, on the basis of 1975 voting patterns, cost the NDP eight to ten seats.

The Eckardt commission's recommendations were enacted in their entirety in legislation introduced the day following the tabling of the report. Despite vigorous protests from all three opposition parties during debate in the House, the bill was passed without amendment a week later.