

Rep by Pop—The New Urban Myth



by **LARRY
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Consider the following fact of democracy in our province: three people sitting in the Lucky Dragon Cafe in Oyen have the same political clout as 10 at the Tim Hortons just off Deerfoot Trail in Southeast

Calgary. The amount of influence these coffee-sippers in east-central Alberta exert on the political process—at the expense of those in cities—underlines how representation by population in the provincial legislature has become Alberta's urban myth.

Due to unparalleled urban growth in the past decade, population in the constituency of Calgary-Shaw shot up from 34,216 in 1996 to 82,516 in 2001, while Drumheller-Chinook remained stagnant with only 25,062 people. (The average constituency population is 35,951). That gives voters in the sparsely populated rural riding more than three times as much power at the ballot box as those in Calgary. Agriculture Minister Shirley McClellan, who represents Drumheller-Chinook, speaks for only one-third the number of people as Calgary-Shaw backbencher Cindy Ady. Yet both Tory MLAs have the same voice in the legislature and the same weight in setting public policy.

Other examples of rural electoral bias abound. Political scientist J. Paul Johnston notes that Liberal candidate Bruce King, who came second to Justice Minister Dave Hancock in Edmonton-Whitemud (population 46,520) in 2001, actually polled more votes than the winners in 28 less populated ridings. In under-populated ridings, "very small portions of the electorate are able to control outcomes," the University of Alberta professor told the recent

electoral boundaries commission, "and they're usually people who have resources and organization."

There is more at stake here than coffee shop political banter. The lack of sway urban voters have on the body politic is evident in the fact that Ralph Klein's Conservatives have been elected and re-elected with an impoverished urban platform. The provincial government has refused to restore the municipal transportation grants it cut in 1993 and has done relatively little to help fix crumbling city streets, sidewalks and sewer lines. Because of urban growth, Edmontonians and Calgarians are looking at tax hikes this year of 4.9 and 4.8 per cent respectively. But the provincial government, its coffers overflowing thanks to that same growth, is refusing to help shoulder the load.

Rather than doing something to correct this democratic deficit, electoral reforms currently under consideration merely perpetuate it. A five-member electoral boundaries commission, headed by provincial ethics watchdog Bob Clark (himself a former rural Socred MLA), has redrawn the electoral map to provide what it calls "effective" rather than equal representation. The proposals give Calgary two new seats when population growth calls for three, and eliminate one riding in Edmonton's city core, which is indefensible considering the capital city's growth rate. Clark will present the commission's final report to the legislature this month. But it will be badly out of date by the time the next election rolls around in 2005, keeping urban voters in the same disadvantaged position they are now in.

The commission's recommendations reflect their belief that our electoral system should be used to prop up the political strength of rural Alberta, not unlike the way England's 19th century rotten bor-

oughs preserved political power for aristocratic landholders. Instead of viewing the province as communities of voters, the commission saw it as competing rural and urban geographic regions. When it heard from rural MLAs who put a million miles a year on their vehicles getting around their sprawling constituencies and have to meet regularly with as many as 20 elected councils, the commission agreed that the difficulties encountered in representing geographically large ridings should be balanced against the principle of equal representation.

That misses the point. If their constituencies are too big, MLAs should be able to hire more staff, open up more constituency offices, use more teleconferencing and send more e-mail. "The excellent communications technology across Alberta makes distance, area and population density insignificant barriers to accessibility," wrote commission member Bauni Mackay, the lone dissenter to the commission's recommendation to take a seat away from Edmonton.

Despite demands the public places on its politicians, they're not social workers, ombudsmen, Workers Compensation Board advocates or lobbyists for municipal councils. Their primary job is to represent their constituents on the basis of one person, one vote. Just as geography shouldn't deny constituents access to the political process, it also shouldn't be used as an excuse to create a preferred class of voter.

"Delivering effective representation is more than simply over-representing people in sparsely populated areas," Prof. Johnston told the commission's hearings. "There are many other things we need to do, and it lets government off the hook when we take the easy way out."

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