

# Rural British Columbia and Political Representation: Yale Lillooet - as a case study

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This paper was first planned to be presented in Lillooet BC when the Citizen's Assembly met there, but due to a change in my situation and a move to Victoria, I was unable to present it. I offer it now as a written submission.

In BC we have embarked on a ground breaking process through the Citizens Assembly and giving the power to the citizens to make real decisions on how we choose our politicians. The purpose of the Citizens Assembly is to explore alternatives to the existing system of the First Past the Post electoral system in place in British Columbia and possibly recommend a change to be voted on by the public in May 2005. Those with an eye on politics have talked about electoral reform for some years, and have proposed various ways to solve the inequity of electoral results where the percentage of votes achieved by a political party is rarely close to the number of seats won in the election. Rarely have the ideas and solutions of the electoral system geeks focused on problems specific to rural ridings of British Columbia; by looking at Yale-Lillooet as a case study, this paper will examine those problems, and assess whether electoral reform can address them. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on electoral reform in 2000.

The term Riding for a political constituency is used only in Canada. It was coined with the notion that a political constituency would be small enough that one could cover all of it in one day on horseback (under 100 km in any direction). In this way constituencies were geographically small enough for one representative to represent the whole area without an impossible travel schedule. Because of the rural origin of the term, and to remind readers of the geographic limits to political representation, this paper will use the term riding instead of constituency.

Since the inception of representation of the rural areas of Canada, there has been an ongoing battle between size of the riding and equity of each riding's relative population.

This was just recently referred to emphatically in the final report of the British Columbia Electoral Boundaries Commission:

The first relates to our concern with respect to British Columbia's overriding demographic reality, namely, the inexorable population drift toward the Province's Lower Mainland. The proposals contained in our report of December 3, 1998, together with these amendments described above, represent our best efforts in the discharge of the Commission's functions under section 3 of the *Electoral Boundaries*

*Commission Act.* There is no doubt our task under the *Act* would have been much simplified had we not committed ourselves to preserving the existing number of electoral districts in what we refer to as the rural areas of the Province.

Notwithstanding the challenges resulting from that commitment, we feel that our proposals, as amended, meet the overall constitutional mandate to design an electoral map for the Province which will provide for the effective representation in the Legislative Assembly for all British Columbians. However, we feel constrained to note that, in absence of some statutory solution similar to that in place in Saskatchewan, by which the electoral representation of rural British Columbia can be guaranteed at its present level, the next Commission may well find it impossible, under the current legislative framework, to avoid recommending a reduction in the number of electoral districts in the rural areas of the Province. (*Page 62, Amendments to the December 3, 1998 Report to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, June 3 1999*)

This problem is fundamental to the rural areas of British Columbia, but often ignored in the urban parts of province. The issue of equity between populations has gone to the courts a number of times, most notably with the *Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Saskatchewan)* ([1991] 2 S.C.R. 158). In fact, Saskatchewan has created laws allowing for large variations in the number of constituents represented by a single MLA. As yet, no similar statutes exist in British Columbia.

While this paper looks specifically at the Yale-Lillooet riding, it also echoes the situation for such ridings as North Coast, Skeena, Bulkley Valley-Stikine, Cariboo North, Cariboo South, Columbia River-Revelstoke, East Kootenay, West Kootenay-Boundary, Nelson-Creston, North Island, Peace River North, and Peace River South. These ridings comprise 13 of the 79 ridings in the province in BC. All of them are over 10 000 square km, 11 of them have the 11 smallest populations after the 1999 redistribution. If issues in this paper are taken broadly it can be further extended to: Prince George North, Prince George-Mount Robson, Prince George-Omineca and Powell River-Sunshine Coast. However, these four ridings are really more urban-like with large hinterlands.

## **Rural Political Representation**

Rural population growth in small towns has not kept pace with the growth of urban parts

of British Columbia. As time has passed, the population quota needed to be a riding has steadily increased. In the span of one generation, this quota has more than doubled and rural populations often barely managed to increase.

One way that the policy makers have dealt with the relative population shift has been through shifting riding boundaries. Large rural areas are often simply grafted onto urban or suburban ridings to place the rural areas somewhere. For the most flagrant example of this, one only needs to look at the small isolated communities at the north end of Harrison Lake which, for many years, were attached to Mission-Kent. From Port Douglas or Skookumchuk by car, one would have to drive five or six hours through several different ridings to reach the office of the MLA in Mission. Only in the revision of the most recent Electoral Boundaries Commission were they moved to the much more logical West Vancouver-Garibaldi Riding, where many residents do their shopping and have extended family, although this riding itself is still an odd hybrid of rural and urban populations.

As it stands, on a purely per-capita basis, rural parts of British Columbia are over-represented in Victoria as a reflection of their share of the provincial population. There good reasons for this, but are relatively low-population rural ridings sustainable over the long term? The *Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Saskatchewan)* ([1991] 2 S.C.R. 158) places parity of voting power as being of prime importance, although it made exceptions to allow for ridings with low populations in special circumstances such as geographic concerns. How far can >special circumstances= go to continue to allow for rural representation? The British Columbia Electoral Boundaries Commission created six ridings in which they needed to invoke special circumstances.

The relative per-capita over-representation of rural areas is not reflected in any sense of real political power. The Yale-Lillooet MLA has to try and represent 12 different communities and consequently is spread quite thin; the travel time alone is enormous in a riding without a single airport with scheduled flights. By comparison, the city of Vancouver has ten MLAs working for its interests and harbour to harbour flights of 45 minutes.

### **Some History of the Yale-Lillooet Riding.**

The current Yale-Lillooet riding consists of the following communities: Keremeos, Princeton, Hope, Yale, Boston Bar, Lytton, Lillooet, Logan Lake, Merritt and a host of smaller places such as Bralorne, Goldbridge, Tulameen, Cawston, Seton Portage, Pavilion and Spences= Bridge. With the last redistribution the riding lost Cache Creek and Ashcroft but gained Keremeos.

None of these places are of overwhelming regional importance, as they are in turn serviced by the Fraser Valley, Kamloops and Kelowna. However, it is an important transportation corridor: this riding is the only way one can get via land from the southwest of British Columbia to anywhere else in Canada, be it by Highways 1, 3, 5 or 99 or the three rail lines. Within its boundaries, resource industries still reign supreme, particularly forestry, mining and agriculture. They are being joined by tourism, as local residents attempt to grab the attention and the revenue of the many travelers who make their way through the riding.

Yale-Lillooet has been roughly the same area since the amalgamation of the Yale and Lillooet ridings in the redistribution before the 1966 election. Since 1972, the riding has always been held by the governing party. In many ways Yale-Lillooet is a good example of a rural swing riding. Much of the reason the riding was held by the NDP from 1966-1972 had to do with who they ran (Bill Hartley) and the same goes for the Social Credit party from 1975-1986 (Tom Waterland). In both cases the politicians were generally well respected, and they did a decent job of representing the area. It takes any MLA many long hours to represent the riding in any meaningful manner; it is consequently more than a full-time job.

As with all rural ridings, Yale-Lillooet has experienced a long-term reduction of its influence in Victoria. In 1963, with two ridings, the area represented 3.85% of the MLAs, after 1966 it was 1.82% and now it is set to be 1.27% - less than 1/3 political clout it held just over a generation ago.

In 1996, the riding was one of the most obvious examples of the centre right and right splitting the vote allowing the New Democratic Party a second term as government. The result that year was NDP 41.06%, Liberals 34.29%, Reform British Columbia 19.83% and PDA 4.09%. With a simple addition of Liberal and Reform votes, one

can see that the >free enterprise vote= made up a majority, especially since the two parties were comprised of activists formerly united as the Yale-Lillooet Social Credit Riding Association. In 2001, the rallying cry among the centre right and right was unity to avoid another vote split; no one spoke of electoral reform as the answer.

This assumption of a vote split is a simplistic view and only works because of the vagaries of the first past the post electoral system. A much more productive way to view the 1996 results is as a reflection of the spectrum of political views within the riding, and an emerging diversity of public opinion. When one views the 1966-1991 election results, the riding was effectively a two-party race for the whole period.

While 1996 would seem to be a classic example of the vote splitting problem, the 1991 race is actually even more worthy of study. In 1991, Yale-Lillooet was the scene of the last two-person race in a British Columbia riding, but even this ballot, the winner, Harry Lali of the NDP, was unable to gain a majority of the votes cast. Close to five percent of the voters chose to spoil their ballots. Normally a BC riding has a range of 0.75 to two percent of the ballots spoiled. In discussions with people who acted as scrutineers for both the NDP and Social Credit in that election, they reported a large number of ballots with comments about the lack of a Liberal candidate or simply the word @Liberal@ written in and an >x= next to it. The 1991 result indicates a desire of the public in this area for an alternate choice in the election, a larger diversity in the political philosophies available on the ballot. Under the current system, though, this desire for greater diversity on the ballot is not going to be represented in a larger diversity of opinion representing Yale-Lillooet in Victoria.

The 2001 election saw strong Liberal election machine running not against the incumbent NDP MLA, but a new candidate with very little organizational support. The 2001 election also saw the most candidates run in Yale-Lillooet than ever before - a total of six, this included the leader of the First People=s Party. The winner did score a convincingly large percentage of the vote, but the very nature of the 2001 election and the surrender by the Dosanjh and the NDP before the election means the 2001 result is not likely indicative of future results.

### **The Role of the MLA and Related Problems for Rural Ridings:**

Are the MLAs useful as individual representatives, anyway? With the degree of party loyalty demanded of today's MLA or MP, there seems to be little or no scope for independent action or thought. In some ways a pure PR list system might reflect the reality of politics in Canada, one in which the role of independence of the MLA is limited and the party has all the power, but this would be a cynical and limited view of MLA's role. The MLA still has an important duty as advocate for the people in the riding, especially rural ridings where most small towns feel utterly powerless to have any impact on how the world functions.

The current MLA for Yale Lillooet comes through Lillooet on a regular basis. When he does, many parts of the community turn out to meet with him and raise the issues that are currently a problem. Dave Chutter takes an ad in the local paper before he comes making sure everyone knows he is going to be in town. Dave Chutter is simply following in the footsteps of the previous 4 Yale-Lillooet MLAs. Earlier, as an example from 1998, the then MLA, Harry Lali, came to town with the Minister of Forests, David Zirnheldt, and they met with a number of different groups over the course of an evening in the City Pizza Restaurant. Everyone in town knew that this was the time and place to make an approach to the MLA. All evening, different groups came in and took a table. The MLA and Minister moved from one table to the next as the evening wore on: one table had the back to the land hippies, another with the Chamber of Commerce, and another the local Chiefs. The concerns of the small town were being related directly to the elected representative, something which is unlikely to happen if the MLA is even further removed from the area. When Tom Waterland was the MLA, he had a motorhome that was a mobile office and came to town regularly.

While not being able to elect the party of your choice is a major problem with the current electoral system, in Yale-Lillooet there is a second problem of rarely being able to elect an MLA that comes from within a one-hour drive of where people live and work (in the case of Bralorne and Gold Bridge, they will be lucky if they ever have an MLA within 2 hours drive of them.). Since 1963, Lillooet has not been the home of a single MLA. This is longer than most of the voters have been alive. Rural ridings are already too large, leaving some towns utterly unrepresented in Victoria for generations.

In an urban riding, getting to the constituency office of MLA is easy. Even if all of the

ten Vancouver ridings were to be made into one large super riding as proposed by Nick Loenen in his book *Citizenship and Democracy: A Case for Proportional Representation*, it would be very surprising if one had to go more than 5 km to get to an MLAs office. For someone in Lillooet, the office of the MLA is 150 km away. In the same distance, an urban dweller in the GVRD could reach the offices of over 30 different MLAs.

Many rural areas have suffered badly over the last decade, with ever increasing centralization of power into regional centres or to Victoria. Rural school boards have been amalgamated, all local control of healthcare has been removed, small court houses and schools have been closed, forest districts have been for amalgamated. This has been felt very keenly by the citizens in ridings such as Yale-Lillooet. The MLA is one of the few sources of influence that has not been centralized.

### **Public Attitudes towards Electoral Reform in Yale- Lillooet**

Harry Lali of the New Democratic Party won the 1996 election with 41.09% of the vote, versus 34.29% for Jim Rabbit of the Liberals, and 19.83% for John Stinson of Reform. While this was not a close result, it is viewed locally as very bad case of vote splitting.

Jim Rabbit and John Stinson are both former members of Social Credit; they ran against each other for the Social Credit nomination in 1986. Jim Rabbit defeated John Stinson on the last ballot by one vote. Jim Rabbit went on to be a one-term Social Credit MLA and was defeated in 1991 by Harry Lali. In 1996 these two men both decided to run for MLA, but for different parties, John Stinson as a Reformer and Jim Rabbit as a Liberal. Between them they split the old Social Credit organization and split the supporters. The result for the Reform party was one of their better showings in the 1996 election. The result for the Liberals was seen as a needless loss.

One would expect that the 1996 election would make the centre right and right in Yale Lillooet a hot bed for electoral reform, but this has not been the case. There is a fear that changing the current system will mean the loss of the riding and the further removal of power from the local communities. As much as many right of centre people disliked Harry Lali and the NDP, he was preferable to having an MLA from a newly

emerging urban centre such as Kamloops.

Among supporters of the NDP, the experience of 1952 and 1953 is only now receding with the disaster in 2001, for so many years they felt the Alternative Vote or preferential balloting system used during these elections robbed them of a rightful chance to govern. The experience is handed down to each generation within the party as gross injustice of the past that should be avoided at all costs. Locally, this NDP history expresses itself in a fear that the NDP will never again be able to win the Yale-Lillooet riding if there is a preferential voting system. This fear persists, even with the evidence of the past election results which show that the New Democratic Party has won the riding three out of ten times with a majority of the valid voters.

The citizens of the riding have rarely given much thought to electoral reform because of the voting history of the riding. In the ten elections since the formation of the riding, the winning candidate has received a majority of the valid votes cast on six occasions. Only three times has more than one in six votes gone to someone other than one of the top two candidates, but at the same time, two times out of ten elections there have been only two candidates. Even with the collapse of the NDP vote in 2001 and the increased number of candidates, the 2001 saw a higher percentage go to the top two candidates than in 1996.

Only in 1996 did >vote splitting= and electoral reform become something the public has thought about. For most of the history of the riding the first past the post system has worked for the local people and been a reasonable expression of the will of the communities.

In series of interviews, it is clear that very few people are well informed about various forms of proportional representation. The overriding concern that arose in interviews was the fear that any reform could mean the loss of the local MLA or that more power will be gained by political party structures. Most of the people spoken with for the purpose of this paper did not want to see any significant change to the existing system and would be unlikely to support PR in a referendum.

### **What system would work best for rural areas?**

In an urban area such as Vancouver or Victoria, the boundaries of ridings often splits neighbourhoods and rarely reflects the whole of an urban region. The city of Vancouver has ten ridings, but the role of the MLA is, in fact, to represent much the same set of urban interests. One city gets ten MLAs; in Yale-Lillooet more than ten communities have a single MLA.

It seems most PR systems aim to address the issues of fairness and equity in the urban environment, where there are enough votes cast for losing candidates within a small geographic area that large political points of view are lost after the election are over. Most PR systems do nothing to deal with the pre-existing problems of rural ridings, and in many cases, exacerbate them.

*Under a pure proportional representation list system:*

The list system would remove all geographic links. This is not a big problem for Vancouver, where the sense of geography is not that important, as neighbourhoods have to be divided to provide numbers small enough to meet the population quota for a riding. Under a list system, could the public ever be sure of getting an MLA that has any understanding of the issues of Yale-Lillooet? There are too few people in Yale-Lillooet to sway the party powers that need influencing in order to place a local person high enough on the party list to ensure election. It is likely that a pure party list system would produce a result that would alienate almost all of the rural people of British Columbia. The geography of British Columbia demands retention of geographic links.

*Under the mixed member parliament - the German and New Zealand models.*

This allows the geographic link to be maintained, but unless one accepts increased numbers of MLAs, the population quota for individual ridings will rise; any further increase will destroy the chances of rural ridings like Yale-Lillooet to continue into the future. This loss of rural ridings will not be accepted by the public in those areas.

A mixed member system can allow for ridings with more inequities in geography and population, since the second vote compensates for the uneven distribution. The urban dwellers do not need as many directly elected representatives, but the rural areas

really do need the few representatives that they have at the moment.

One scenario is to give the province roughly 90 MLAs in an MMP system; one third would be list and two thirds directly elected. One could then set the directly elected ridings at differing electoral quotients. It would be possible to set the urban 40 ridings at 75 000 people each and the rural 20 ridings at 33 000 people each. However, this may not go over well with the urban voters, and it could be construed as an affront to one-person-one-vote democracy.

In its favour, the extra list MLAs would end up effectively serving as better representatives for the diverse spectrum of urban people. At the same time, a reasonable rural geographic link would be maintained. This is a model that could serve the needs of the rural people of British Columbia.

*Multi-member ridings with a single transferable vote - the Irish Model.*

Geographic links continue, but areas represented become huge. If there were a unified riding of Yale-Lillooet, Shuswap, Kamloops North, and Kamloops, the odds are that it would be a rare election in which any one of the four would come from within the Yale-Lillooet area. Furthermore, the odds are that the primary focus of the riding will be Kamloops and the needs of that urban centre. The boundaries of this riding already existed as the Thompson Health Region. The Thompson health region showed that a large area like this focuses on the largest concentration of people to the detriment of the small centres.

This model would not be likely to serve the rural areas well, and therefore would be perceived as unacceptable in rural areas.

*Current regime - first past the post.*

Yale Lillooet has been a *de-facto* two-party race until 1996, and has regularly elected MLAs by a majority. If this pattern were to continue, then for the people of Yale-Lillooet, there would be no problem with continuing with a first past the post system. It seems unlikely, however, that the past trend will continue. If the continued fracturing of public political opinion continues, it is feasible to see five or more people run in all the future elections, which will likely create a situation in which a majority win will become

less and less common.

In the longer term this model will be less and less acceptable to people in rural ridings as their diversity will rarely be reflected at the end of the election.

*Alternative voting (AV) or preferential balloting.*

This is the general model in Australia and the system used in the early 1950s in British Columbia. It features individual ridings electing one MLA each, but with each voter marking his or her choice in order of preference.

In Yale-Lillooet, a one-member AV system would likely be the most acceptable compromise between reflecting public opinion and retaining a local riding.

What would work the best? In the case of ridings that are primarily rural in nature, the best bet probably lies in adopting AV for a single member. A further criterion should be that the population quota needed to create a riding be set by a benchmark rural seat such as Yale-Lillooet, to ensure that at least a few rural MLAs remain to represent the vast majority of the land we call British Columbia. This set-up for rural seats can be adopted together with a Multi-Member STV riding system for the urban parts of British Columbia.

**Conclusion:**

Rural British Columbians are officially over-represented, but in effect, have their concerns under represented in Victoria. As it stands, 66 of the 79 ridings have a significant urban centre of 25 000 or more. British Columbia=s hewers of wood and drawers of water seem to be destined to become irrelevant to the powers that be in Victoria, as they are less crucial to the formation of government.

Any change to the electoral system must make a concerted effort to better represent the concerns of people who live in British Columbia=s rural regions. If any proposed changes lower the number of rural ridings, then the rural citizens of British Columbia remain better off under first past the post than any proposed new system and will consequently act to stop any move to electoral reform.



**Yale - Lillooet Election Results from 1966 to 2001**

	NDP	%	Socred	%	Liberal	%	PC	%		%		%	% vote of top two Parties
1966	<b>3885</b>	<b>55.4</b>	3131	44.6									100
1969	<b>3799</b>	43.8	3414	39.4	1460	16.8							83.2
1972	<b>6157</b>	<b>57.3</b>	2933	27.3	424	3.9	1224	11.4					84.6
1975	4654	38.1	<b>5738</b>	46.9	599	4.9	1234	10.1					85.0
1979	5870	41.8	<b>7309</b>	<b>52.0</b>			864	6.2					93.8
1983	6574	40.7	<b>9178</b>	<b>56.8</b>	412	2.5							97.5
1986	6895	44.7	<b>7424</b>	48.1	617	4.0	485	3.1					96.9
1991*	<b>7740</b>	<b>52.3 (49.95)</b>	7057	47.7 (45.5)	(697)*	(4.5)							100 (95.5)*
	NDP		Liberal		PDA		Reform		FCP				
1996	<b>7080</b>	41.1	5912	34.3	706	4.1	3419	19.8	124	0.8			75.4
	NDP		Liberal		Green		ANP		Marij		Peoples		
2001	2817	17.2	<b>9845</b>	<b>60.1</b>	1657	10.1	1126	6.9	807	4.9	136	0.8	77.3

Winners in bold, over 50% results in bold

\* In 1991 there were an unusually high number of spoiled ballots; most had some indication of the voter wanting to choose Liberal. See text of paper for details. These votes denied the NDP a majority of the voters.