

## Submission to the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission

By the Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership

Friday, 9 October 2009, Red Deer, Alberta

The Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership is a small, not-for-profit, private foundation based in Calgary. Our chief concerns regarding electoral boundaries address issues of fair representation, attention to historic and future under- and over-representation, level playing field, identity of voters, impartial application of special considerations, and of course transparency in the entire process.

Regarding the democratic principle of “one person-one vote” our current electoral boundaries leave considerable inequity, most notably in rural over-representation and urban under-representation.

What principles, in our view, ought to guide the Commission in aiming for fair representation?

Certainly, straight numbers matter. In addition to addressing current population figures, though, the Sheldon Chumir Foundation urges the Commission to consider past over- and under-representation, and future demographics in order to redress historic inequities and assure to the extent possible that we approach the “one person-one vote” ideal for the next and future elections.

Specifically, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo was the most under represented community in 2004 and so the need to redress is even more pressing there, we would argue. In addition, Lesser Slave Lake, West Yellowhead, and Dunvegan-Central Peace were all over-represented in 2004 and look to be even more so now.

In current terms, Calgary and Fort McMurray in particular face under-representation, where population outstrips the proposed electoral riding average. Of considerable concern to us is the vast discrepancy between the 2006 federal census figure for the riding of Wood Buffalo of 52,495 and the 2008 Municipal Census for the Regional Municipality showing 77,050 permanent residents. Using this population, the riding has 104% more people than the proposed provincial average, nearly twice as under-represented as Calgary West .

While the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act requires that the Commission consider the most recent federal decennial census and leaves it to the Commission’s discretion to consider “some other province-wide census” (Section 12(1)), the Sheldon Chumir Foundation encourages the Commission to consider all available, reliable demographic data including municipal census.

Our quick analysis of boom and bust period changes showed that Alberta lost roughly 20% of the people it gained during the previous cycle. This type of analysis could be used by the Commission in its demographic projections. As well, our review of population changes 2005-2008 as reported by Alberta Municipal Affairs shows continuing growth in the Highway 2 corridor and Fort McMurray as well as relative shrinking in many but not all rural areas. Notably, all counties east of Edmonton along the Saskatchewan border are shrinking in relative terms, with the exceptions of those bordering Fort McMurray and Medicine Hat. To plan well for fair representation for the next ten years, future



demographics must be considered. At a minimum, the Commission should consider recent actual population changes.

Given that the new boundaries will apply for an eight to ten year period, we strongly encourage the Commission to go beyond the 25% population variance limit required by the Act to strive for a 10% ideal. The last electoral boundary map appeared to aim for 10% and included only five ridings outside the 15% margin. We can and should do as well again.

In order to minimize future inequities and address the significant rural-urban divide, we request that the Commission carefully limit the number of electoral districts as much as 50% below the average population. We recognize that while the Act permits up to four exceptions along prescribed criteria (Section 15 (2)), such exceptions will exacerbate the divide, particularly considering recent patterns of population growth and loss in the province. In addition, we encourage a transparent and impartial process for considering which, if any, divisions may be granted special consideration.

Certainly the Commission is expected to recommend changes which are impartial, based upon expert opinion, and consider public input. We fully support all efforts to ensure no politicization of boundary drawing occurs and urge the Legislative Assembly to respect the independent recommendations of the Commission.

In addition, the Sheldon Chumir Foundation is concerned about who is being over- and under-represented. We looked at the five least represented districts of Calgary North West, Edmonton Whitemud, Calgary West, Airdrie—Chestermere and Wood Buffalo, all with at least 40% more population than the proposed electoral district average for 87 MLAs. Chief characteristics shared by all of these communities are as follows:

- Predominantly young families, with few seniors
- 10-30% or higher visible minorities
- Higher income areas, with few low income residents
- Fast growing communities

By contrast, the greatest over-represented areas of Dunvegan-Central Peace and Lesser Slave Lake do not share as many identity characteristics. We considered four towns: Fairview, Grimshaw, Slave Lake and High Prairie. There is variation among the proportion of seniors, level of median income for full-time workers, and pace of population growth or loss. What all communities do have in common is that they are 96-97% Caucasian.

We do not imply that this was deliberate in any way. Cities are growing and are attracting the majority of new immigrants. However, under-representation of young families and visible minorities is a concern, as we see low voter turnout among those less than 35 years of age and among some visible minority and new immigrant communities. These identity findings have implications for the future health of democracy in Alberta.

Finally, we appreciate the efforts of the Commission to seek input from the public – both institutions and private citizens – and we look forward to engaging with you further in this process.

