Naming Canada's Constituencies

by John C. Courtney

Unlike the Americans who assign numbers to their electoral districts, Canadians, as a carryover of their British heritage, name theirs. The idea of using geographic place names to describe electoral districts traces its origins back to the time when the British House of Commons was to represent, in theory at least, the "commons" or "communities" of the kingdom. This article calls for the more creative use of constituency names to improve our knowledge of Canadian history.

There were counties and boroughs of England and burghs of Scotland which, until Britain's electoral reforms of the 19th century, generally elected two members each regardless of their population. The name given a constituency was commonly taken from the county or borough itself or from the most important city or town within it. With the introduction of single-member districts, those units with sufficient population to warrant more than one electoral district were often subdivided using directional descriptors, as in "Leeds, North East," or "Hull, West."[1]

In Canada the value that inclusion of the name of a neighbourhood, town, city, county or region in a constituency designation is clearly considerable to some individuals. It is important to local officials, such as a mayor's office and boards of trade, whose responsibilities include promoting a city or region. It is of equal importance to many MPs who seem determined to ensure that their constituency name is broadly inclusive of geographic place names in their riding as possible. In the first federal redistribution after the adoption in 1964 of the *Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act* (EBRA) ten percent of the submissions from the general public to the commissions related directly to the name to be assigned to particular ridings, and ten percent of the objections filed by MPs called for changes to the constituency names proposed by the commissions. That has remained the custom following every decennial redistribution since the 1960s.[2]

According to the EBRA the name to be assigned to a constituency is the responsibility of the federal boundary commissions. MPs, along with the public, would be free to make representations to the commissions about riding names, but the final authority to select the name was to remain with the commissions. Unwilling to accept that feature of th EBRA, MPs have "successfully asserted their right to change the names of their constituencies through the mechanism of the private member's bill."[3] They have used that method to change the names of their ridings when it suited their purpose knowing full well that it was a virtually fool-proof way of getting the alterations adopted. As every member may, at some point, want to alter the name of his or her constituency, no member is likely to object when a batch of private members' bills calling for name changes comes up for a vote in the Commons. Members respect a tradition that the final choice of a constituency's name is entirely up to the local member and that the approval of changes is assured when it is asked for.

MPs have not shied away from using this parliamentary option to alter the descriptions of their constituencies. In the period immediately before and after the 1977 election, the names of 44 of the recently-designed 301 federal seats were changed. This represented an average of nearly two per month and was the largest number of changes in any 24-month period since the adoption of the EBRA. The alterations made by parliament are typically

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of the "add-on" variety, although occasionally the order of towns or regions listed with a riding title is changed. (There appear to be no recorded instances of constituency names being shortened by MPs.) Thus, in 1997-98, Quebec's "Gaspé-Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine" became "Bonaventure-Gaspé-Îles-de-la-Madeleine-Pabok," and Ontario's "Bramalea-Gore-Malton" was changed to "Bramalea-Gore-Malton-Springdale." These are but two examples of what political scientist Norman Ruff has labelled "galloping hyphenation" of constituency names in Canada.[4]

MPs no doubt sense that they have an opportunity to acknowledge in the public arena a town, city or region that may have been recently created or that was overlooked, for whatever reason, by the commission when naming the seat. As a consequence, of the 301 seats in the Commons elected in 1997 some 37 percent were hyphenated combinations of at least two names and 8 percent were multiple hyphenated combinations of three or more names. This represented a ten percent increase over what the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (the Lortie Commission) had found when it had concluded earlier in the decade that a reduction in the number of hyphenated constituency names was in order.

> ***MPs intent on acknowledging as many communities in their ridings as possible are not the only agents of "galloping hyphenation."***

Redistribution commissions too have resorted to this practice, especially when population shifts within their province have forced them to eliminate existing districts and to join them to enlarged adjacent ones. At the time of Manitoba and Saskatchewan's rapid rural population growth in the first one-third of the 20th century, district name hyphenation was unknown. Of the 38 federal seats in those provinces in the 1920s, not one was composed of two place names. By the end of the 20th century, rural depopulation, combined with the relatively fewer Commons seats assigned to those provinces, had led to over 50 percent (15 of 28) of the federal constituencies in Manitoba and Saskatchewan being made up of composite place names. Many of these, such as "Brandon-Souris," "Regina-Qu'Appelle," and "Saskatoon-Rosetown-Biggar," were unions formed of districts that had at one time existed under single names.[5]

Concerned about the demonstrated propensity of MPs to "add-on" whenever they deemed it appropriate, the Lortie commission had called for acceptance of a reformed process of naming constituencies. It was particularly concerned with the "costs to the public treasury and to local constituency associations" every time a private member's bill calling for a different constituency name was approved by parliament. It noted as well the inherent difficulties in capturing all of a district's principal "geographic areas and communities of interest" in any name "no matter how many hyphenated names are strung together." Accordingly, Lortie called for the clear delegation of the naming authority to commissions and an end to using the private member's bill to alter riding names. It also recommended that changes to riding names be prohibited for the entire period between decennial boundary readjustments, and that the number of hyphenated district names be reduced. The Lortie recommendations were largely ignored. Only one federal electoral boundary commission attempted to follow the royal commission's guidelines in the 1994-95 federal redistribution (Saskatchewan), and by century's end there had been no signs that MPs were prepared to yield their place in the process.[6]

Provinces have dealt with the matter of naming constituencies in a similar fashion to that followed federally. Geographic place names, often hyphenated in rural seats and frequently coupled with directional modifiers in cities, predominate. Until recently, Prince Edward Island had combined the ancient British practice of naming seats with the American one of numbering them. Thus, the names of the province's three historic counties were subdivided numerically into "4th Prince," "1st Kings," "3rd Queens" and so on. That has now given way to geographic naming.

Of all the provinces, Quebec has made the most concerted attempt to get away from geographic names of constituencies. Following the terms of its governing legislation, Quebec's permanent *Commission de la représentation électorale* consulted with the province's *Commission de toponymie* to determine appropriate names. The names assigned to most seats have remained overwhelmingly geographic. But Quebec has tempered that by naming seats in honour of famous individuals in Quebec history. The only three new names added in the 1990s to the roster of Quebec's seats were named after distinguished Quebecers: "Marguerite-D'Youville" (in honour of the 18th century founding sister of the Grey Nuns and the first Canadian to be canonized), "Borduas" (after the 20th century surrealist painter, Paul-Émile Borduas), and "Blainville" (for an 18th century seigneur, Louis-Jean-Baptiste Céloron de Blainville).

Australia, like Quebec, has given geographic place names to some districts and the names of distinguished Australians to others. Many place names in Australia (as in Canada) derive from aboriginal terms but, with the exception of Canada's three northern territories, these have

been adopted as the names of redistributed seats much more commonly in Australia than in Canada. In Australia, explorers, artists and former prime ministers have been honoured by having seats named after them, as have female pioneers in politics, medicine, the trade union movement, and social work. As a consequence, there has been far less reliance in Australia on geographic place names than has been the case in Canada. The differences in the constituency names in Australia and Canada are apparent at a glance. Australians have all but avoided the Canadian disease of "hyphenitis." Of the 148 seats in Australia's House of Representatives at the end of the millennium, only two had combined names.

Also in contrast to Canada is the fact that in Australia (a country in which three of the six states include a direction of the compass in their name) not a single federal district has a directional reference in it. In Canada 21 percent of the Commons' seats have a directional modifier of some sort: "northeast," "southwest," and so on. To be sure, directions are always helpful in getting one's bearings. But over-reliance on them suggests an unwillingness to break with the past and a certain lack of imagination in finding suitable alternatives. Of the 13 federal constituencies in Calgary and Edmonton, for example, 11 combine the name of their respective city and a compass direction. Yet both cities have an abundance of distinctive neighbourhoods and have been home to many distinguished men and women whose names could be commemorated. Why confine the descriptions to a city name and a compass direction?

Canadians often decry their limited knowledge of their own history and fail to recognize the accomplishments of those who have made outstanding contributions to the country. The Lortie Commission urged a shift in naming constituencies away from geographic place names (especially of the hyphenated variety) to a recognition of distinguished Canadians and important historic events or locations.[7] There have been a few moves in that direction federally, as in the 1990s when the Saskatchewan commission named one of the province's seats "Palliser" and another "Wanuskewin."

But more could be done. Mayors and boards of trade might be pleasantly surprised how, with time, a neighbourhood, city, town or region could gain a certain unexpected, but nonetheless deserved, recognition. Possible inclusions might be a "LaFontaine" seat in the heart of Montreal, a "Leacock" in the vicinity of Orillia, an "Agnes MacPhail" for Grey County, a "Woodsworth" for Winnipeg North Centre, a "Poundmaker" in Saskatchewan, and an "Emily Carr" on Vancouver Island. The switch would bring with it a measure of honour for distinguished individuals of Canada's past and help to alert Canadians to the names of important historical figures. It would also be a welcome change from ponderous directional reference points and an excessive reliance on hyphenated place names.

Notes

1. W. Ivor Jennings, *The British Constitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), pp. 14-15. The last 12 two-member seats in the British Parliament (all university based) were eliminated by the *Representation of the People Act* of 1948.
2. John C. Courtney, "'Theories Masquerading as Principles': Canadian Electoral Boundary Commissions and the Australian Model," in John C. Courtney (ed.), *The Canadian House of Commons: Essays in Honour of Norman Ward* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press) tables 6 and 9, pp. 150 and 153.
3. Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (RCERPF), *Reforming Electoral Democracy*, I.., p. 167. A valuable source for tracing the history of Canadian constituencies, their name changes and their electoral history is: Library of Parliament, *History of the Federal Electoral Ridings, 1867-1980* (Ottawa, 1983), 4 vols.
4. See RCERPF, Reforming Electoral Democracy, I., p. 168.
5. In its attempt to implement the Lortie Commission's recommendation calling for fewer hyphenated district names, the Saskatchewan electoral boundary commission had, in 1994, created a "Qu'Appelle" seat. On the recommendation of the local MP, that was changed by Parliament in 1998 to "Regina-Qu'Appelle." Similarly "Saskatoon-Rosetown" was changed to "Saskatoon-Rosetown-Biggar" in 1997 by way of a Private Members' Bill.
6. RCERPF, Reforming Electoral Democracy, I. p. 168. The Saskatchewan commission's comments addressing the MPs' objections to the constituency names are found at Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for the Province of Saskatchewan 1995, "Disposition by the Commission Pursuant to s. 23(1) of the *Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act* of Objections Filed by Members of the House of Commons with Respect to the Commission's Report Dated August 24, 1994," (Ottawa, 1995) pp.5-6.
7. RCERPF, *Reforming Electoral Democracy*, I., p. 169.