

TOWARDS A FAIR ELECTORAL MAP

Comments on the new electoral map proposed by
Quebec's Commission de la représentation électorale

Presented by the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal

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Chambre de commerce
du Montréal métropolitain

Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal

Preamble

The Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal has some 7,000 members. Its mission is to represent the interests of Metropolitan Montréal's business community and provide an integrated range of specialized services for individuals, merchants and companies large and small so as to support them in realizing their full potential in innovativeness, productivity and competitiveness. The Board of Trade is the largest private economic development organization in Quebec.

Introduction

The Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal would like to underscore the interest we have in the process of forming Quebec's electoral map. We believe there are important connections between the public's participation in the electoral process, how institutions function, and the health of Quebec's political system. The process of revising the electoral map is an opportunity to strengthen these links.

For the Board of Trade, it is important to remember that a healthy democracy results from a fragile balance between collective participation by all citizens, and the perception that each citizen, individually, can influence the outcome. It is no accident that the most hotly contested elections are those with the highest participation rate: every vote *can* make a difference.

In an election, the idea that each vote is equal is crucial in having the election's outcome seen as fair and legitimate. That's where the danger lies: if the exercise of democracy starts to be seen as favouring some more than others, its legitimacy quickly gives way to cynicism, mistrust and, finally, alienation.

It is therefore from the perspective of promoting the health of Quebec's democratic institutions—with a specific eye to strengthening the notion of each vote's equality—that we present our comments on the preliminary proposal to redraw Quebec's electoral map submitted by the Commission de la représentation électorale (CRÉ), tabled before the National Assembly on March 12, and now the subject of public consultations.

It goes without saying that these comments follow logically and consistently from the Board of Trade's observations at the previous consultations, leading up to the adoption of the current electoral map. At the time, we expressed our profound disagreement with an electoral map that, in addition to featuring major imbalances in the size of the different ridings across the province, gave the city National Assembly representation that was well below its demographic weight. This is particularly deplorable as the Montréal metropolitan area represents almost 50% of Quebec's population and gross domestic product, as well as being responsible for about 70% of Quebec's exports abroad. Because of its status as an economic driver, we believe it is essential that the Greater Montréal Area have National Assembly representation that reflects its population's weight as accurately as possible.

1. Proposed new electoral map: a major improvement

For these reasons, the Board of Trade believes that the electoral map now being revised does not foster a perception of equity among voters. In the current map, there are too many instances in which a vote's weight is heavily affected by the riding in which it is cast. The Board of Trade is concerned about the substantial differences in the average number of voters per riding in Quebec. Even if we put aside the two acknowledged exceptional ridings—Îles-de-la-Madeleine and Ungava—the number of voters in Quebec's current ridings diverges from the average of 45,207 voters by 14.31% (i.e., 6,467 voters more or less). As Table 1 shows, in 2007, in 42% of Quebec's counties, the voter population showed a more than 15% difference from the average voter population. In 20 ridings, the difference was even 25% or more.

We naturally acknowledge that creating a “perfect” electoral map, in which every Quebec vote has an equal weight, is not an achievable goal. However, where there is an imbalance or inequity, or where representativeness no longer exists, it is because there are sizeable differences between the number of voters in one region and another, as is the case with the existing electoral map.

Table 1				
Number of ridings with voter populations 15% above or below the Quebec average, 45,207 voters.				
Differences	Existing electoral map 2007 population		Proposed electoral map 2007 population	
	Ridings	% of total	Ridings	% of total
± 15% or more	52	41,6%	28	22,4%
± 25% or more	20	16%	2	1,6%

The perception of equity is especially jeopardized by the existing electoral map as the positive and negative differences tend to show up in clearly identifiable locations. That is, the ridings in which the number of voters is 15% or more *below* the average tend to be in remote regions. Conversely, regions that include an urban agglomeration or are in the immediate neighbourhood are where we find counties with voter populations more than 15% *above* the average, as shown in Table 2. This is also why the Board of Trade believes that the metropolitan area, seen broadly, is under-represented in the current electoral map. In 2007, the Montréal metropolitan area contained over a dozen ridings with more than 52,000 voters, a number that exceeds the Quebec average for voters per riding by more than 15%.

For the Board of Trade, if we do not overhaul the electoral map quickly, the perception of equity could be pushed to its breaking point. We are also concerned about the Quebec political system’s ability to work cohesively if we do not put a greater focus on representativeness. This is why the Board of Trade welcomes the proposed new electoral map with open arms, as it does more to take population movements into consideration and puts forward changes accordingly. First and foremost, we believe it is highly laudable to reduce the average positive or negative difference in the number of voters per riding from 6,467 to 4,345, bringing the difference below 10% (9.6% in fact)¹. This is an initial indication that the new electoral map is better balanced.

In the same vein, we salute the adjustments that make it possible to keep the number of “exceptional ridings”, where there is more than a 25% difference between the voter population and the Quebec average, at two (Table 1). According to the data on the voter population as at November 30, 2007, 20 out of 125 ridings are currently “exceptions”. It was very important to correct this situation. With two exceptional ridings, it is fair to say that they “prove the rule” of our electoral system’s representativeness. However, when there are twenty exceptions—so many that they can no longer be called exceptions—, they discredit rather than confirming the rules that are in place.

From Montréal’s perspective, we also note that, with the proposed electoral map, in general, the differences in the average number of voters in the Montréal metropolitan area is, overall, closer to the provincial average. Moreover, with the redistribution proposal, among the ridings that fall into the Montréal metropolitan area, the number of ridings with a voter population that is more than 15% above the provincial average declines substantially (from 20 to 11, cf. Table 2). The adjustments made in Montérégie, Laurentides-Lanaudière and Laval, with a new riding being added in each case, are a substantial improvement.

1. We once again excluded the Ungava and Îles-de-la-Madeleine ridings from this calculation.

Regions	Existing electoral map 2007 population			Proposed electoral map 2007 population		
	Ridings					
	Total	Number - 15%	Number + 15%	Total	Number - 15%	Number + 15%
3.1 Abitibi-Témiscamingue – Nord-du-Québec	4	3		4	2	
3.2 Bas-Saint-Laurent	3	2		2		
3.3 Capitale-Nationale	11	1	4	11	1	
3.4 Chaudière-Appalaches	8	4		7		
3.5 Côte-Nord	2	2		2	2	
3.6 Estrie – Centre-du-Québec	9	3	2	9		2
3.7 Gaspésie and Îles-de-la-Madeleine	5	5		4	3	
3.8 Île-de-Montréal	28		1	28		2
3.9 Laurentides-Lanaudière	14		8	15		3
3.10 Laval	5		4	6		2
3.11 Mauricie	5	3		5	2	
3.12 Montérégie	21		7	22	2	4
3.13 Outaouais	5		2	5		2
3.14 Saguenay – Lac-Saint-Jean	5	1		5	1	
Totals	125		52	125		28

2. Electoral map: A tool for democracy, not economic development

The Board of Trade must acknowledge that the proposed new electoral map creates major changes in some parts of Quebec. That said, insofar as these changes reflect objective changes in population movements, the Board of Trade continues to believe that they are justified.

Here, we think it is important to deal with an argument that is frequently invoked to justify maintaining National Assembly representation in excess of the weight of the voter population in some regions: the need to support economic development in areas which are disadvantaged by their remoteness.

For the Board of Trade, redrawing the electoral map is an opportunity to reiterate a very simple truth: economic development and democracy are very different things. The electoral map is not and should not be a tool for economic development.

However important and laudable it may be to help develop all regions of Quebec, electoral representation is not an effective way of doing so. In an election, the idea that each vote is equal is critical to having the election's outcome seen as fair and legitimate. We do not believe a democratic exercise that favours some people over others will serve the cause of regional development, particularly if the government policies and decisions designed to contribute to development came to be regarded with pronounced scepticism and cynicism.

In terms of development, we must remember that the regions, the capital and the metropolis *all* have major challenges, however different they may be. Despite these differences, we will be in a better position to meet these challenges if we work together, complementing each other. Rather than nurturing our rivalries, we must emphasize what we have in common, beginning with the fact that we belong to the

same democracy. In this context, the Board of Trade believes that it is in no one's interest—even that of far-flung regions—to tweak our democracy to the point that we doubt it's fairness.

For this reason, we believe that Quebec as a whole will come out ahead if the new electoral map proposed by the CRÉ is adopted.