

C. The North

1. The evolution of the North's electoral districts

Immediately prior to the work of the 1966 Angus Commission, there were seven electoral districts in the North (see The North, Map 1):

- West
Prince Rupert, Skeena and Atlin
- Central
Omineca and Fort George
- Peace
North Peace River and South Peace River.



The North, Map 1



The North, Map 2

a. The Angus Commission (1966)

The Angus Commission determined that, based on population alone, the North was entitled only to three MLAs but decided that, due to the great diversity of interests and difficulty of communication, “the proper and effective representation of the people in this part of the province” required five members. It achieved this (see The North, Map 2) by:

- combining the electoral district of Skeena with Prince Rupert;
- eliminating the electoral district of Atlin; and,
- enlarging North Peace River into a new electoral district to be called Northland, which would extend westward to the Alaska Panhandle, as most of these communities were serviced by the Alaska Highway.

The Legislative Assembly accepted some of the Angus Commission’s recommendations respecting other areas of the province, but did not accept any changes for the North. It preserved the electoral districts of Atlin and Skeena, thus retaining seven electoral districts in the North.

b. The Norris Commission (1975)

The Norris Commission concluded, without giving detailed reasons, that all seven electoral districts in the North should be preserved (see *The North*, Map 3), but with several boundary and name changes:

- North Peace River and Atlin should be merged into one new Atlin-Northland electoral district, similar to that proposed by the Angus Commission. The commission heard strong arguments from the civic representatives of Fort Nelson that their natural lines of communication and interest were along the Alaska Highway and to the West, rather than with Fort St. John.
- Because of a rapid increase in population in the electoral district of Fort George, it should be split into two electoral districts, to be named Prince George North and Prince George–Rocky Mountains.

The Legislative Assembly did not adopt any of the Norris Commission’s recommendations, thus retaining the same seven electoral districts.

c. The Eckardt Commission (1978)

Judge Eckardt heard strong submissions that the number of MLAs for the North should either be kept at seven or even increased, having regard to the importance of resource development. There were only eight MLAs (out of 55) north of Cache Creek, and he was told that



The North, Map 3



The North, Map 4

this had resulted in decisions favouring the south to the detriment of the North. MLAs from the North were so strongly outnumbered that they had not been able to make their influence felt.

Although Judge Eckardt was empathetic to those views, he was concerned that increasing representation in the northern, sparsely populated electoral districts would result in an injustice to the urban and suburban residents in southern B.C. However, he did propose an increase of one electoral district by dividing Fort George into two because of an increase in population (see *The North*, Map 4), and that there should be boundary changes to several existing electoral districts.

The Legislative Assembly adopted all of Judge Eckardt's recommendations, increasing the number of electoral districts in the North from seven to eight.

d. The Warren Commission (1982)

The only Warren Commission recommendation that affected the North was to convert North Peace River into a two-member electoral district. The Legislative Assembly did not adopt Mr. Warren's recommendations.

e. The McAdam Commission (1984)

None of the McAdam Commission's recommendations affected the North.

f. The Fisher Commission (1988)

Judge Fisher was determined to create electoral districts whose deviations fell within his self-imposed limit of plus or minus 25 percent. The sparsely populated North proved to be his most difficult challenge: “I was deeply moved by testimony detailing the hardships experienced by residents of this frontier and concerned about the expressions of feelings of alienation from centres of economic and political power in the south.”

In his interim report, Judge Fisher proposed that eight ridings be retained in the North (see *The North, Map 5*). Specifically, he recommended that:

- the electoral districts of Prince Rupert (minus 38 percent) and Atlin (minus 85 percent) be merged into a new district, to be named North Coast–Stikine, extending as far south as Hartley Bay, as requested by that community;
- Skeena (plus 12.8 percent) be reduced in size by drawing the new northeast boundary between Terrace and New Hazelton;
- a new district be created, to be named Bulkley Valley;
- Prince George be increased from two to three electoral districts: Prince George–Omineca, Prince George North and Prince George–Mount Robson; and,



The North, Map 5



The North, Map 6

- the unacceptably low population of South Peace River should be augmented by including in that district the community of Mackenzie and surrounding area, in order to bring that district within his minus 25 percent goal.

In his final report, Judge Fisher affirmed his earlier decision to propose eight electoral districts for the region (although population alone would have warranted only six districts), given the problems associated with size, sparse population and accessibility. However, he made several significant boundary changes to his proposed North Coast–Stikine and Bulkley Valley electoral districts. In spite of opposition from residents of Mackenzie, he refused to return it to a Prince George based district. The Legislative Assembly adopted all of Judge Fisher’s recommendations (see *The North*, Map 6), retaining eight electoral districts in the North.

g. The Wood Commission (1999)

In its interim report the Wood Commission made a fundamental policy decision that no region in B.C. should suffer a reduction in its representation. Thus, the North should retain its eight electoral districts (see The North, Map 7).

In the west, it recommended retention of the existing three electoral districts. For population reasons, it kept Stewart and the Nass Valley communities in North Coast, rather than including them in Skeena, even though the principal land transportation connection was to Terrace. The commission was troubled that Bulkley Valley–Stikine accounted for over 20 percent of the provincial land mass, but could find no way to reduce this area without simply shifting the problem to another electoral district.

In the central North, the commission was persuaded that Mackenzie and other Rocky Mountain Trench communities should again be part of a Prince George–based electoral district, and that the boundaries of the three electoral districts reaching out from Prince George should be adjusted in order to balance their populations.

In the Peace, after excluding the Rocky Mountain Trench communities from Peace River South, the commission needed to rebalance the populations of the two Peace River electoral districts.



The North, Map 7



The North, Map 8

It recommended that the dividing line be moved north of the Peace River, to run along the eastern municipal boundary of Fort St. John, to include several communities just outside the city limits in the Peace River South district.

In its final report, the Wood Commission made several technical changes to its earlier recommendations (see *The North, Map 8*), but maintained its decision to include the Rocky Mountain Trench communities in a Prince George–based electoral district.

Having commenced its boundary setting task with a policy decision not to reduce the number of electoral districts in the North, the Wood Commission was able to create three electoral districts spreading out from Prince George that came within the statutory limit of minus 25 percent. However, even after some boundary adjustments the remaining five electoral districts exceeded this limit, ranging from minus 27.4 percent (Skeena) to minus 34.4 percent (Peace River South), based on 1996 census data.

The commission was satisfied that all five of these electoral districts constituted “very special circumstances” within the meaning of section 9(1)(c) of the legislation, justifying deviations in excess of minus 25 percent. The commission was persuaded that residents of the North felt a strong sense of alienation from Victoria, that they believed that they needed to retain their present level of representation in

order to receive effective representation, and that any reduction in representation would heighten their sense of injustice. In finding “very special circumstances” in specific cases, the Wood Commission relied on the usual factors that would justify any deviation – history, large geographical areas, remoteness, inaccessibility and strong regional identities. There was nothing qualitatively different in these areas; the factors were simply more extreme.

The Wood Commission ended its analysis with the following caution (June 1999 report, p. 62), which bears repeating:

In the 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.* (Emphasis added.)

The Legislative Assembly adopted all of the Wood Commission’s proposals, retaining eight electoral districts, but it did not introduce legislation to address the caution articulated by the commission.

2. Our analysis of the North’s electoral districts

The area we describe as the North region currently has eight electoral districts. (see map, page 86.) We have grouped these into subsets:

- West
 - North Coast, Skeena and Bulkley Valley–Stikine
- Central
 - Prince George–Omineca
 - Prince George North
 - Prince George–Mount Robson.
- Peace
 - Peace River South
 - Peace River North.

These electoral districts, with their deviations at the time of the 1996 census and now, are as follows (see Table 6):

TABLE 6: CURRENT SMP ELECTORAL DISTRICTS IN THE NORTH

Electoral District	1996 deviation*	2006 deviation**
North Coast	-32.8%	-51.2%
Skeena	-27.4%	-43.8%
Bulkley Valley–Stikine	-31.8%	-41.1%
Prince George–Omineca	-20.7%	-29.1%
Prince George North	-17.9%	-32.8%
Prince George–Mount Robson	-15.8%	-32.8%
Peace River South	-34.4%	-44.6%
Peace River North	-34.2%	-32.5%

* based on 1996 census data, and assuming 79 electoral districts

** based on 2006 census data, and assuming 79 electoral districts

If we were to create electoral districts in the North so that the population of each electoral district approximated the provincial electoral quotient, there would be only five electoral districts. In 1999, the Wood Commission made a “...commitment to preserve rural representation and to ensure that no region of the Province loses representation.”⁵⁵ This meant that the North would retain its eight electoral districts. However, because so much of the North is sparsely populated, five of those eight electoral districts had populations more than 25 percent below the provincial electoral quotient, and they were accordingly granted “very special circumstances” status.

Based on current population data for the North (pop. 256,196), all of the eight electoral districts now have populations more than 25 percent below the provincial electoral quotient for 79 electoral districts. The first question we had to address, therefore, was whether “very special circumstances” currently exist in those eight districts. Earlier in this report (see Part 5), we discussed our approach to “very special circumstances.” Pivotal to that analysis is our conclusion that “very special circumstances” must be determined on a district-by-district basis. Thus, in our view it is necessary for us to work through, in turn, the current electoral districts in the North.

⁵⁵ Wood Commission *Amendments to the December 3, 1998 Report to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia*, June 3, 1999, p. 2.

We began by reviewing what people had told us during the public consultation sessions. We also identified anomalies that emerged from the Wood Commission report – areas that should have been placed into one electoral district, but were put into another for overriding population reasons. Before long we had developed a list of communities that should be kept together, and of geographically based challenges that seemed insurmountable, including the following:

- The northwest coast area will inevitably be very challenging for an MLA to represent. It has many small coastal communities accessible only by water or seaplane, with many constituents living on Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), a seven-hour ferry ride. The current North Coast electoral district’s population rests far below the provincial electoral quotient, with little scope for adding constituents without encroaching into Terrace and Kitimat.
- People living in Stewart and the Nisga’a Nation communities in the Nass Valley are currently in the North Coast electoral district. Their Prince Rupert-based MLA must drive five hours through another electoral district (Skeena) in order to meet with them. They should be in the same electoral district as their principal trading centre (Terrace).
- Atlin is one of B.C.’s most remote

communities, lying a few kilometres south of the Yukon border in the northwest corner of the province. Its residents must drive into the Yukon before driving either south on Highway 37 to Terrace, or east along the Alaska Highway to Fort Nelson and Fort St. John.

- Prince George is B.C.’s largest urban centre in the North, with a population of just under 71,000 – too large for one electoral district, but not large enough for two. Prince George is currently divided among three urban-rural electoral districts, which start in downtown Prince George and stretch far out from the city to the west, the north and the southeast. We understand the rationale of the Wood Commission to use Prince George as the anchor for these three electoral districts, as a way of balancing the population evenly among all three electoral districts. However, we believe that the issues of concern to the city’s urban residents may be different from the issues facing the small communities at the extremities of those districts. To the extent possible, we think that each electoral district in this area should be composed of constituents who share similar community interests.
- Residents of the Peace River are physically isolated from the rest of the North by the Rocky Mountains, and there is little community

interest between them and population centres to the west and south. With a population of about 64,000 distributed throughout a vast territory, the Peace has too many people for one electoral district, but scarcely enough for two.

The total population of the current eight electoral districts in the North stands at 256,196. All of the electoral districts exceed the limit, with deviations ranging from minus 29.1 percent (Prince George–Omineca) to minus 51.2 percent (North Coast). If it were possible to reconfigure all eight electoral districts so that each one had exactly the same population (32,025), then each electoral district would have a deviation of minus 38.5 percent, based on 79 electoral districts. If the number of electoral districts were increased to the maximum of 85, the deviation would be minus 33.8 percent.

a. The West

The current North Coast electoral district stretches from Stewart in the north to Bella Bella in the south to Haida Gwaii in the west, with Prince Rupert as its principal population centre. We wholeheartedly accept the many submissions that it is an exceedingly difficult district to represent. There are very few kilometers of paved roads, and many communities are accessible only by water, by expensive seaplane service

or by arduous ferry service from northern Vancouver Island or between Prince Rupert and Haida Gwaii. North Coast currently has a minus 51.2 percent deviation. The only way to increase its population would be to expand the district eastward. If we brought Terrace (pop. 11,320) into North Coast, it would not bring the electoral district within the statutory limit as the deviation would be minus 29.4 percent with 79 electoral districts. It would also result in Terrace and its neighbour Kitimat being in different electoral districts ignoring community interests – an unacceptable solution.

Thus, we concluded that North Coast should remain largely intact (see proposed North Coast electoral district map, page 88), subject to several boundary adjustments:

- That Stewart and the Nisga’a Nation communities in the Nass Valley (pop. 2,440) be included in the same electoral district as Terrace. The transportation corridor for these communities lies within the same electoral district as Terrace. Furthermore, Terrace is the source for regional services.
- That the southern boundary of North Coast be extended farther south, to the northern boundary of the Mount Waddington Regional District and east to the western

boundary of the Cariboo Regional District.

With 81 electoral districts, the proposed North Coast electoral district will have a deviation of minus 54.4 percent. We are satisfied that it constitutes an extraordinary case, having regard to its geography and the challenges to representation thereby caused, and the blunt reality that there are no other population centres that could be brought into the district without causing unjustifiable disruptions to well-established community interests. It is, in our view, an instance where respect for geography and community interests must take priority over population.

b. The Peace

For over 50 years this region has had two electoral districts, not because its population justified two, but for overriding geographical and demographic reasons. Currently, Peace River South includes Dawson Creek, Chetwynd, Tumbler Ridge and Taylor, while Peace River North includes Fort St. John, Hudson’s Hope and Fort Nelson. The traditional dividing line between the north and south Peace is the Peace River. However, in 1999 the Wood Commission moved this boundary farther north from the Peace River to the southern edge of Fort St. John, in an attempt to balance the population

between the two electoral districts. In that redistribution, both electoral districts were granted “very special circumstances” status, with deviations of minus 34 percent each. They now have deviations of minus 32.5 percent (North) and minus 44.6 percent (South).

We first examined whether the Peace should retain two electoral districts and, if it should, whether one of its electoral districts should be joined with communities to the west and south, in order to bolster its population.

Driving from Prince George to Dawson Creek along Highway 97 through the Rocky Mountains dramatizes how physically separate the Peace region is from the rest of the province. Oil and gas production, coal extraction, ranching and farming drive the Peace economy. The Peace is geographically part of the Prairies, and residents of the Peace have a natural affinity with Albertans. We understand there are few community interests between the southern Peace communities (Chetwynd, Dawson Creek, Fort St. John and Hudson’s Hope) and the Rocky Mountain Trench communities, such as Mackenzie. The trade route for Mackenzie is Prince George, not the Peace. In 1988, the Fisher Commission created a Peace River South electoral district that stretched from Dawson Creek in the

east to Mackenzie and all of Williston Lake in the west. It was an unpopular decision, which Judge Fisher felt compelled to make in order to create electoral districts that came within his self-imposed deviation limit of minus 25 percent. In 1999, the Wood Commission characterized the linking of the Rocky Mountain Trench communities to Peace River South as an artificial connection, and returned them to a Prince George-based electoral district.

Learning from history, we do not believe that the Peace region should be joined with Mackenzie and the other Rocky Mountain Trench communities. The Peace is a distinct area of the province, and we agree with the Wood Commission that combining the Peace with these communities would be an artificial connection.

Having made that decision, we must next decide whether the Peace region, with a total population of just 63,994, should continue to have two electoral districts or should be combined into one. We have concluded that there should be two electoral districts – combining it into a single district would give it a deviation of plus 26 percent based on 81 electoral districts – untenable, particularly so for such a geographically large, sparsely populated area of the province.

If there are to be two electoral districts, how should the Peace be divided? If we simply balanced the total Peace population between two electoral districts, each would have a deviation of minus 37 percent, putting both outside the statutory limit. It might be possible to justify “very special circumstances” status for the northern electoral district, but this would not be true for the relatively compact southern electoral district. It would also mean dividing Fort St. John between the two electoral districts, which should be avoided if possible.

The Peace has urban and rural components. Dawson Creek (pop. 10,994) and Fort St. John (pop. 17,402) are significant urban population centres, only 70 km apart, connected by a paved highway and with regular flights to Vancouver. Combining them, along with Taylor (just south of Fort St. John), Pouce Coupé (just east of Dawson Creek) and Tumbler Ridge, would create a compact, easy-to-serve electoral district sharing many community interests (see map of proposed Peace River electoral district). It would have a deviation of minus 19 percent.

The remaining area of the Peace stretches from Chetwynd (pop. 2,633) and Hudson’s Hope (pop. 1,012) in the south to Fort Nelson (pop. 4,514)

and several other small Alaska Highway communities in the north. The current Peace River North electoral district extends westward to the point where the Alaska Highway crosses into the Yukon. Historically it has stopped there, rather than going a few kilometers further west to include B.C.’s most westerly Alaska Highway community, Lower Post. In our view, Lower Post has a much more natural community interest with the other Alaska Highway communities further east, and ought to be included in the same Peace-oriented electoral district, rather than in Bulkley Valley–Stikine.

Moving further west, the small community of Atlin (pop. 457) has no road access to any other B.C. community. Residents must drive north into the Yukon, connecting to the Alaska Highway at Jakes Corner, 75 km south of Whitehorse. From there, they must drive southeastwardly to Watson Lake, where they must choose between continuing southeastwardly on the all-year Alaska Highway to Fort Nelson, or turning southward on less reliable Highway 37 to Terrace.

Currently, Atlin is included in the Bulkley Valley–Stikine electoral district. Regardless of which electoral district Atlin is in, its remoteness will always present a challenge for face-to-face

communication between its residents and their MLA.⁵⁶ On balance, we believe that the interests of the residents of Atlin would be better served if they were included in a Peace-oriented electoral district, primarily because of the significantly better highway connection to Fort Nelson.

Consequently, we are proposing that the northern Peace electoral district, which we propose be named Northland, extend westward to include Lower Post and Atlin. This electoral district is, by any definition, a vast, rural, sparsely populated territory.

After making some boundary adjustments so that our proposed Northland electoral district more closely follows the boundaries of the Northern Rockies and Peace River regional districts (see map of proposed Northland electoral district, p. 90), this district will have a deviation of minus 53 percent based on 81 electoral districts. We are satisfied that “very special circumstances” exist in this area, for several reasons. First, residents of this electoral district live in small communities that are spread along an exceptionally long and remote stretch of Highways 29 and 97. While it

is true that recent advances in electronic communication have made it possible for more constituents in rural areas and their MLAs to communicate with each other on some matters without face-to-face meetings, there are still times when an MLA, to ensure effective representation, must make personal visits to the communities in his or her constituency, such as for town hall meetings.

Second, the reality is that, without crossing the Rocky Mountains, there are no other sources of population available to increase the area’s population to a point that its deviation would be less than minus 25 percent. It is our province’s closest counterpart to the vast northern electoral districts that exist in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.⁵⁷

c. The Central North

There are currently five electoral districts east of North Coast and west of the Peace – three of them are centred around Prince George, plus Bulkley Valley–Stikine and Skeena further west. When the Wood Commission established them in 1999, they had deviations ranging from minus 17.8 percent to minus 31 percent. Based on the 2006 census and with 79 electoral

districts, the deviations now range from minus 29.1 percent to minus 43.8 percent. With 85 electoral districts, the range would be minus 23.7 percent to minus 39.5 percent.

Our initial approach was to try to retain all five electoral districts. Simply rebalancing the remaining population among the five electoral districts did not work because, with a total population of 166,777, each district would have a deviation of over minus 35 percent, based on 79 electoral districts in total, outside the statutory limit. Even if the number of electoral districts were increased to 85, the rebalanced districts would have a deviation of minus 30.3 percent.

We then considered retaining the Wood Commission’s approach of centering three electoral districts around Prince George. We found that by dividing the city, we could create three Prince George-centred districts, each with a deviation of minus 25 percent, putting them all just within the statutory limit. Each of these three electoral districts would start in Prince George and then stretch out to the west, north and southeast, as do the current ridings.

⁵⁶ In late 2006 it was announced that, due to a partnership between Industry Canada’s Broadband for Rural and Northern Development Pilot Project Initiative and Atlin Community Network Society, high speed wireless internet access is now available to homes, businesses and institutions in Atlin and outlying areas such as the Pine Creek subdivision, Lakeview, Taku River Tlingit First Nation village and Five Mile First Nations Reserve.

⁵⁷ Two Canadian appellate courts have upheld legislation that authorized deviations of up to minus 50 percent for northern, rural areas: *Saskatchewan Reference* (1991), 78 D.L.R. (4th) 449 (Sask. C.A.), reversed on other grounds by the Supreme Court of Canada (1991), 81 D.L.R. (4th) 16; and *1991 Alberta Reference* (1991), 86 D.L.R. (4th) 447 (Alta. C.A.).

However, that would mean that the two remaining electoral districts further west, Bulkley Valley–Stikine and Skeena, would have deviations greater than minus 52.4 percent each, based on 79 electoral districts, and minus 48.7 percent based on 85.

We do not believe that this would be a justifiable configuration. Two of the five electoral districts would be significantly outside the statutory limit and the remaining three would very likely join them before the next general election in 2009, resulting in all of the five electoral districts being outside the minus 25 percent statutory limit.

Beginning in the west, most of the constituents in the current Skeena electoral district live in the two principal population centres of Terrace (pop. 11,320) and Kitimat (pop. 8,987). The current deviation is minus 39.1 percent (with the addition of Stewart and the Nass Valley, pop. 2,440) based on 79 electoral districts.

Moving east, the current Bulkley Valley–Stikine electoral district has been reduced in size as a result of our proposal that Atlin and Lower Post be included in our proposed new Northland electoral district. Almost all of its constituents live along, or within 50 kilometres of, a 300 kilometre stretch

of Highway 16, between Hazelton and Burns Lake. The remaining district has a deviation of minus 42.3 percent, based on 79 electoral districts.

Moving to Prince George (pop. 70,981), it is too large for one electoral district and not large enough for two, yet the city is currently divided among three. While some people told us that they like this arrangement (or have at least adjusted to it), dividing the city among three electoral districts was done by the 1988 Fisher Commission and the 1999 Wood Commission to facilitate population balancing. It results in three electoral districts that combine urban constituents with rural constituents living hundreds of kilometers away, whose community interests differ widely.

Given Prince George's population, it must inevitably be divided between two electoral districts. The first question that arises is how this division should take place. One option would be to continue the present approach, that would see us divide the city in half and create two Prince George-anchored electoral districts, beginning in the city and stretching out into surrounding rural areas. The other option would be to create one exclusively Prince George electoral district wholly within the municipal boundaries, and then create a second electoral district that includes the bal-

ance of the city, surrounding suburban communities and adjacent rural areas.

We favour the latter approach. We feel that it would be beneficial for the residents of Prince George to have an MLA to focus on the community interests of this urban population centre. Consequently, we are proposing the creation of an urban Prince George electoral district (see map of proposed Prince George electoral district page 91).

Having decided that Prince George should be divided between two electoral districts, geography, demography and transportation corridors dictated the parameters of the second Prince George-based district. About 50 percent of this district's population will come from residents of Prince George, with the balance being spread southeasterly along Highway 16 to Valemount and northerly along Highway 97 to Mackenzie. This district includes the communities within the Fraser–Fort George Regional District. We favour following regional district boundaries whenever possible, because regional districts are local government areas that people are familiar with, and because they tend to reflect community interests. Consequently, we are proposing that this new electoral district's outer boundaries (see map of proposed Fraser–Fort George electoral district) correspond exactly

to the Fraser–Fort George Regional District. In the south, this means that Hixon and Woodpecker will be included in Fraser–Fort George rather than a Cariboo-based electoral district. With 81 districts, it will have a deviation of minus 18.5 percent.

The remaining area of the central North has a population of 76,442. To distribute this population among three electoral districts would result in deviations averaging minus 49.8 percent (based on 81 districts), a result which, in our view, appears unreasonable given the reality that about 98 percent of this area’s population lives along (or within 50 km of) a 580 km stretch of Highway 16 between Terrace and Vanderhoof. Although these electoral districts would contain enormous unpopulated geographical areas, the population of each of these districts would be concentrated along about 200 km of a very accessible highway. We are sensitive to the challenges of winter driving that MLAs in this region face but we are not satisfied that “very special circumstances” exist in these three electoral districts that warrant deviations averaging almost minus 50 percent, when compared to Northland and North Coast districts. We were thus driven to the inevitable

conclusion that this part of the central North, stretching from Terrace and the Nisga’a Nation territory in the west to Vanderhoof in the east, can justify only two electoral districts. In order to balance population and at the same time respect community interests, we propose that these two electoral districts be divided midway between New Hazelton and Smithers.

The more westerly electoral district, which we propose be renamed Skeena–Stikine, would include Kitimat, Terrace, Kitwanga, Hazelton, New Hazelton, the Nisga’a Nation in the Nass Valley, and Stewart, as well as the small communities of Dease Lake and Telegraph Creek farther north. It will have a deviation of minus 24.8 percent. It will correspond closely to the Kitimat–Stikine Regional District boundaries (see map of proposed Skeena–Stikine electoral district, page 93).

The more easterly electoral district (which we propose be named Bulkley–Nechako) would include towns stretching eastward along Highway 16, including Smithers, Telkwa, Houston (and Granisle along Highway 118), Burns Lake, Fraser Lake and Vanderhoof (and Fort St. James along Highway 27). It

would have a deviation of minus 24.7 percent based on 81 electoral districts. It is almost identical in configuration to the Bulkley–Nechako Regional District (see map of proposed Bulkley–Nechako electoral district, page 94).

3. “Protecting northern representation”

We fully recognize that the electoral districts we are proposing for the North,⁵⁸ which has the result of reducing the number of districts from eight to seven, may not be well received by those from around the province who urged the commission to retain the current number of electoral districts in the North.

For example, in a written submission, several points were raised about circumstances facing those who live in the rural areas of the province, including:

- With only eight of 79 MLAs coming from the North, there is a risk that legislation and regulations passed in the legislature affecting the North reflect a Lower Mainland perspective.
- With only 10 percent of B.C.’s MLAs, the North is in a minority position when it comes to representation, and its rights need protection.

⁵⁸ In this report, we use the term “the North” and “northern” to refer to the land mass contained within the following eight current electoral districts: North Coast, Skeena, Bulkley Valley–Stikine, Prince George–Omineca, Prince George North, Prince George–Mount Robson, Peace River South and Peace River North, and our proposed seven electoral districts. During our public consultation we found that people used the term “northern” with a somewhat less precise meaning to include the North with other sparsely populated rural and remote areas of the province, such as the Cariboo and Northern Vancouver Island areas.

Earlier in this part of the report, we included an excerpt from the Wood Commission report cautioning that, in the absence of some statutory solution, this commission may well find it impossible to avoid proposing a reduction in the number of electoral districts in rural areas of the province. It turns out that they did not overstate the challenge. The population of the eight current electoral districts in the North has dropped by 19,795 since the 1996 census. According to the 2006 census and BC Stat's population projections to 2013, (see Appendix O) the total population of our proposed seven electoral districts in the North will increase by only 3,406 over the next seven years (from 256,879 to 260,285).

In relative terms, the North's population is declining, from 7.4 percent of the B.C. total to 6.2 percent since the 1996 census. The feedback we received from around the province during our consultation sessions spoke to this reality, but many of those we heard from at the sessions or in writing submitted that we should use our legislative authority to recommend an increase in the number of electoral districts as a means of preserving the current number of northern electoral districts. As they expressed it, adding seats in the urban areas of the province because of population increase is not an end in

itself, but has an overarching purpose of preserving northern representation.

This notion of linking additional seats to the preservation of the current number of northern electoral districts was reflected in the September 12, 2005 Speech from the Throne, which stated:

The government will introduce an amendment that it hopes will protect northern representation in the legislature. The amendment will allow the commission to provide for up to 85 members under the current electoral system.

Attorney General Wally Oppal expressed a similar sentiment when he introduced the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Amendment Act, 2005* (Bill 14) on October 24, 2005. He stated in part:

With the intent of protecting northern representation in the legislature, Bill 14 also gives the commission the necessary flexibility to recommend electoral boundaries up to 85 electoral districts under our current system or up to 85 members under the single transferable vote model.

Unlike some of the other provinces which have enacted legislation to specify the number of electoral districts in rural areas, our legislation has no such provision. On the contrary, our commission is mandated by the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act* to apply

the principle of representation by population for every electoral district and to apply the factors set out in that *Act* as a basis for proposing a change in the boundaries. *The Electoral Boundaries Commission Act* limits deviations from parity up to plus or minus 25 percent. The only exception is where we have concluded that there are very special circumstances. As mentioned earlier, we have concluded that there are only two such proposed electoral districts, namely North Coast and Northland.

In any event, we examined the outcome to the deviations for the current eight electoral districts in the North on the basis of an increase in the number of electoral districts to the maximum permitted by the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act*. According to the following table, seven of the eight electoral districts in the North would still have deviations exceeding minus 25 percent (see Table 7, page 84).

Thus, even if the commission decided to use its authority to add six electoral districts in the urban areas of the province, it would only marginally ameliorate the deviations found in the current electoral districts in the North.

TABLE 7: CURRENT SMP ELECTORAL DISTRICTS IN THE NORTH
– DEVIATIONS WITH 79 AND 85 ELECTORAL DISTRICTS

Electoral District	Population (2006)	Deviation with 79 districts	Deviation with 85 districts
Prince George–Omineca	36,905	-29.1%	-23.7%
Peace River North	35,162	-32.5%	-27.3%
Prince George North	35,000	-32.8%	-27.7%
Prince George–Mount Robson	34,968	-32.8%	-27.7%
Bulkley Valley–Stikine	30,648	-41.1%	-36.7%
Skeena	29,256	-43.8%	-39.5%
Peace River South	28,832	-44.6%	-40.4%
North Coast	25,425	-51.2%	-47.5%

We are mindful of the submissions that were made on this subject. As can be seen from our discussion of the northern electoral districts, we approached our task by exploring every possible option to ensure that the points raised with us about these areas of the province were respected as we worked towards our conclusions. At the end of the day it became obvious to us that, on the facts we reviewed in detail, the number of northern electoral districts had to be reduced. However, we are entirely satisfied that the electoral districts proposed in the report are, in every case, to the best of our ability, consistent with the principle and factors set out in the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act* and reflect the situation found in all areas of the province.

4. Conclusion

Accordingly, we propose that there be seven electoral districts in the North, as follows:

TABLE 8: PROPOSED SMP ELECTORAL DISTRICTS IN THE NORTH

Electoral District	Sq. Km.	Population	Deviation*
North Coast	149,977	23,135	-54.4%
Skeena-Stikine	149,292	38,199	-24.8%
Bulkley-Nechako	78,193	38,243	-24.7%
Prince George	49	50,893	+0.2%
Fraser–Fort George	51,832	41,371	-18.5%
Peace River	20,052	41,157	-19%
Northland	254,700	23,881	-53%

* based on 81 electoral districts, with a provincial electoral quotient of 50,784

Region: The North – Current Electoral Districts



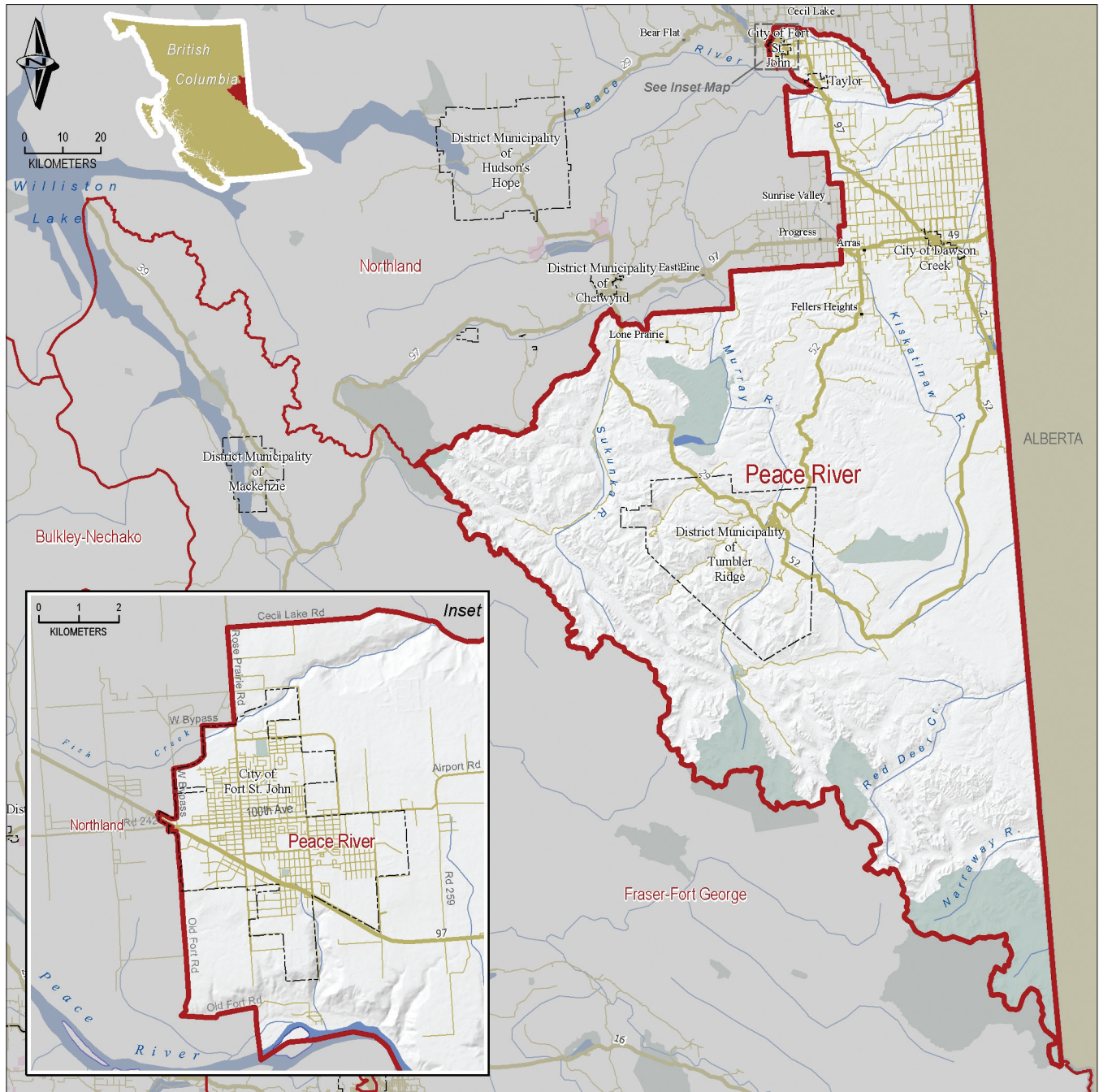
Region: The North – Proposed Electoral Districts



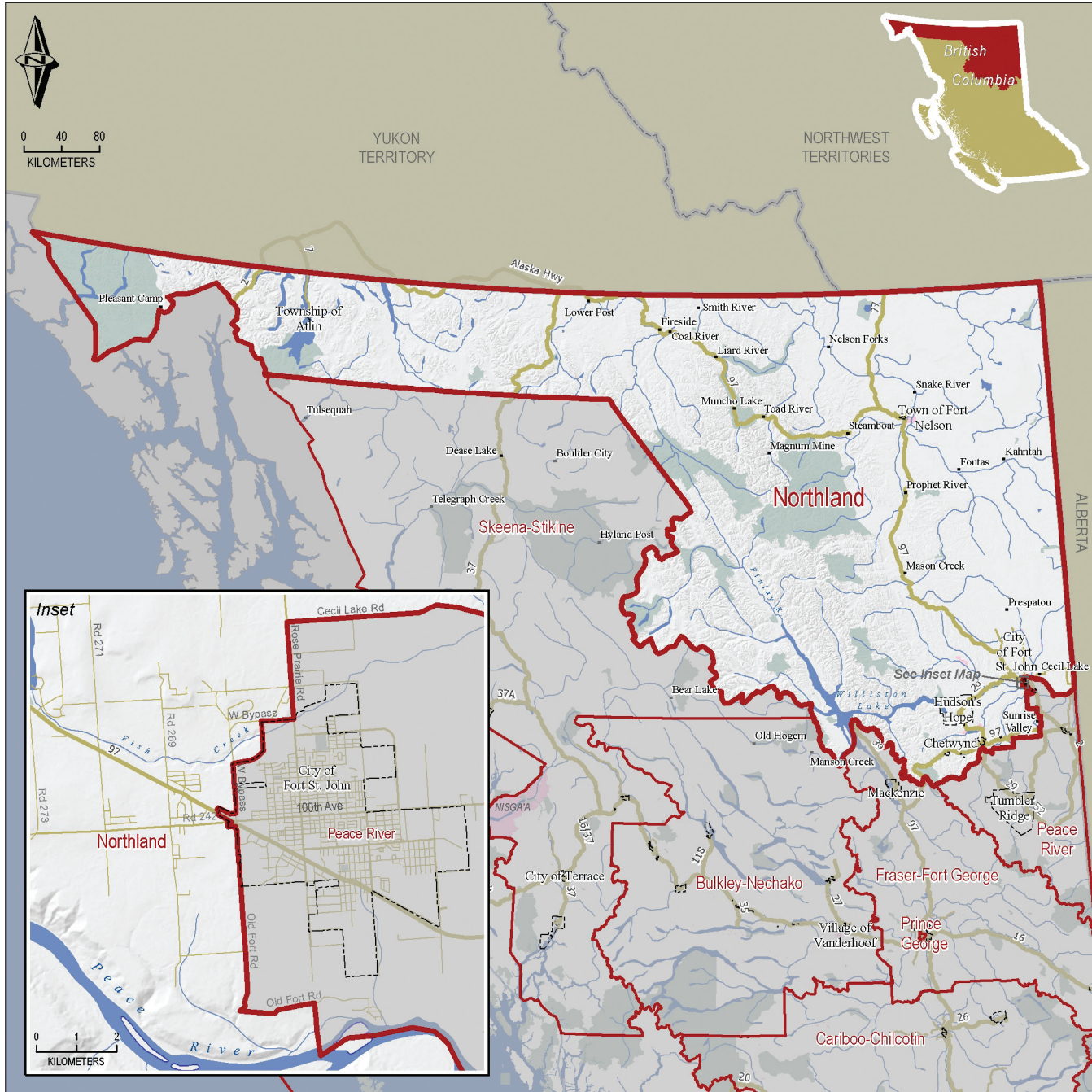
Region: The North – Proposed North Coast Electoral District



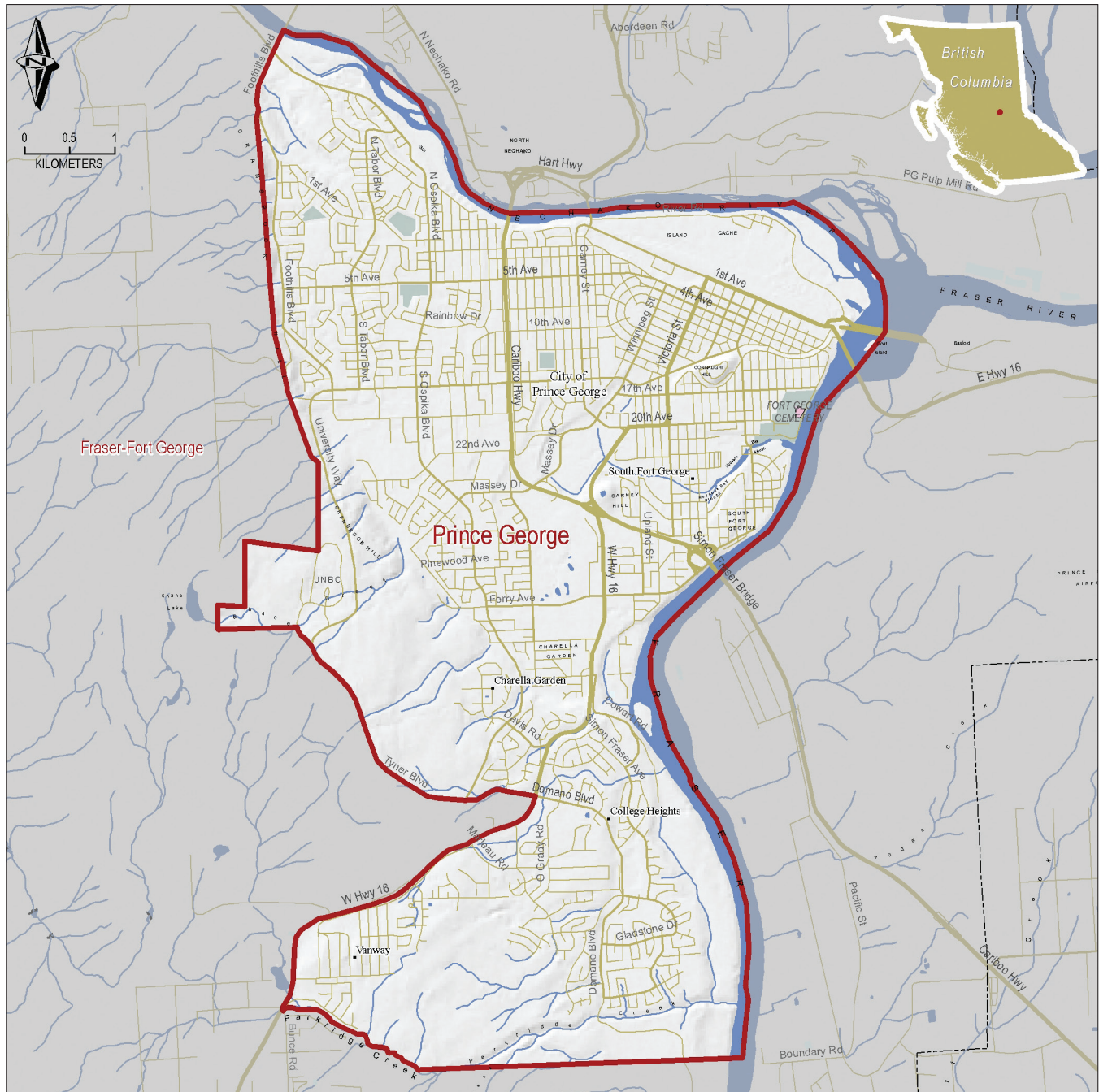
Region: The North – Proposed Peace River Electoral District



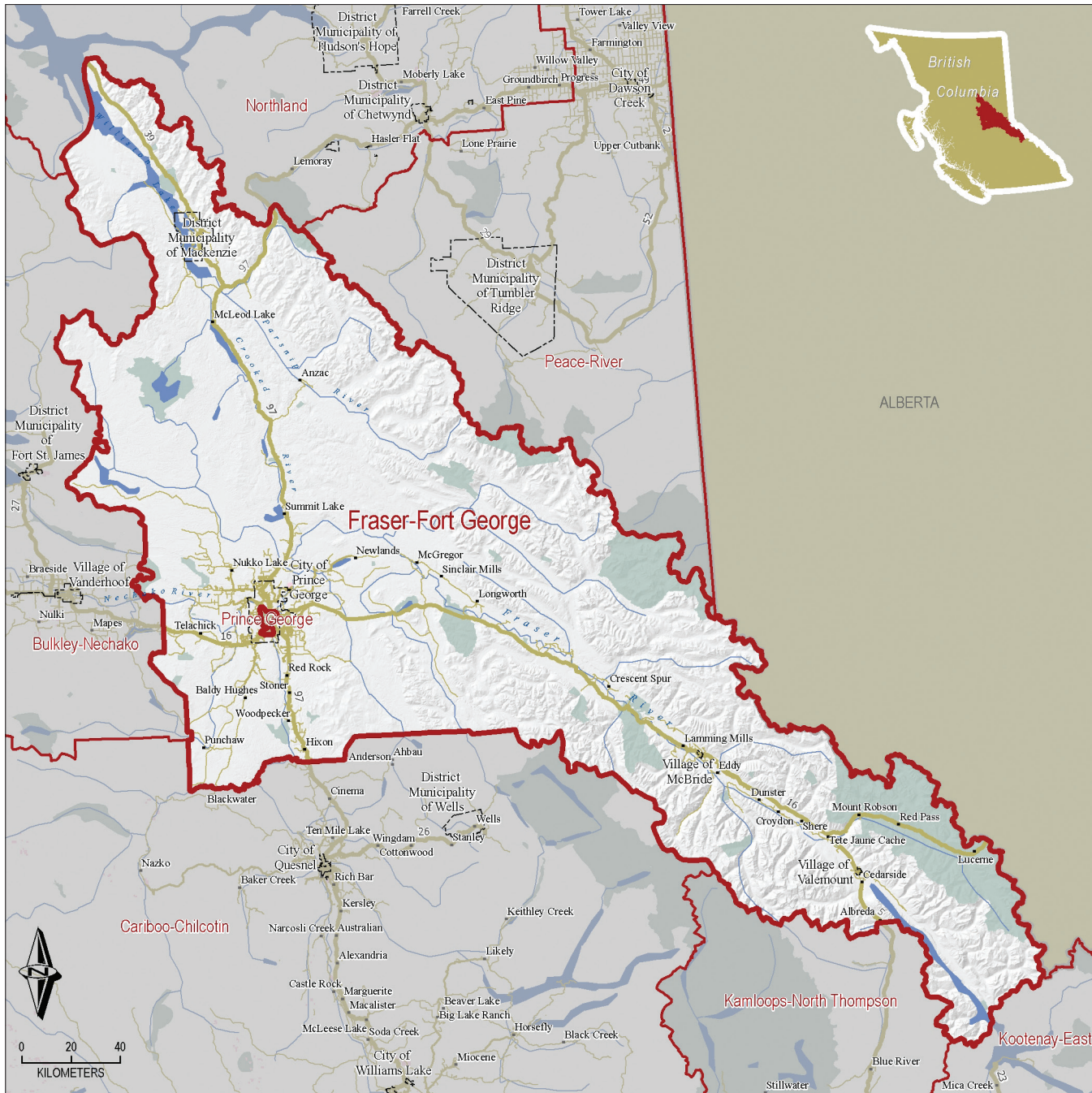
Region: The North – Proposed Northland Electoral District



Region: The North – Proposed Prince George Electoral District



Region: The North – Proposed Fraser–Fort George Electoral District



Region: The North – Proposed Skeena-Stikine Electoral District



Region: The North – Proposed Bulkley-Nechako Electoral District

