

MORE PEOPLE, LESS POWER?

By William Nicoson

“What’s power? People are power!” I remember the words chalked on a blackboard in an early elementary grade. In my first civics lesson I was being taught that, in our democracy, numbers of people in a community determine its political power relative to other communities.

Every ten years, the Census Bureau counts the number of people in communities, counties, states, the country as a whole and, to fulfill my first civics lesson, in assorted election districts of every state. Based on this federal tabulation, the legislature of each state redraws the boundaries of election districts for each house of the state legislature and for members from that state in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The redistricting season is upon us. The Virginia General Assembly has passed redistricting bills for both its Senate and its House of Delegates. It is about to consider a redistricting bill for members of the U.S. House. These measures will determine community clout in all law-making at state and federal levels. My first civics lesson is being tested. And my conclusion is...?

They lied to me back in elementary school.

Reston has grown dramatically over the last ten years. According to Reston Association’s population expert, Cate Fulkerson, in 1990 Reston had a population of 44,527 and in 2000 a population of 56,407. That’s an increase of 26.7% in 10 years. The population of Virginia in those 10 years increased by 14.4%. Thus, as a percentage, Reston’s growth was almost double that of the state as a whole.

Since the 1991 redistricting, Reston has enjoyed the benefits of two State Senators, currently Democrat Janet Howell and Republican Bill Mims. When a senatorial district boundary was first drawn though Reston, I remember feeling concern that the integrity of Reston was somehow being compromised. How foolish! Reston’s clout in the Senate had been doubled. As it turned out moreover, Reston is now represented in the caucuses of both political parties by able and astute leaders, recognized as such by their peers. And, wonder of wonders, they know how to find common ground in serving Restonians.

The 2001 redistricting gives all of Reston (except for a sliver) to Janet Howell’s district. The fact that Reston has grown at twice the rate of Virginia has not saved it from losing half its clout in the Virginia Senate. Where are my civics teachers now?

The unpleasant fact is that legislators redraw election boundaries for their own benefit, without a thought for the benefit of their constituents. In 1991, Democrats controlled both state houses and redrew boundaries to benefit Democratic Senators and Deputies. In 2001, Republicans had the same control and used it to benefit Republicans.

Who was the chief Senate draftsman of the 2001 boundaries? Reston's own Senator Mims. Maybe Reston's voting record looked unreliable to Republican leaders. Or maybe the shift was required for partisan gain elsewhere. Whatever the reason was, it wasn't the interests of constituents.

But hang on. Maybe things will turn better for Reston in the redistricting now under discussion for members of the U.S. House. My informants tell me that our Congressman Tom Davis (R) may share Reston with Congressman Frank Wolf (R) who previously represented Reston. Alternatively, all of Reston may be awarded to Representative Jim Moran (D) of Alexandria.

I have an unhappy vision of a district snaking from Alexandria to Reston. Talk about gerrymandered cobras! Hey, Jim, convince Richmond to stretch your district only to McLean. We want the Tom & Frank team back in Reston. We need -- and our burgeoning growth deserves -- the double clout.

William Nicoson is a D.C. lawyer who has voted in Reston since 1970.