
A New Standing Committee Structure for the NWT Legislative Assembly

by Robert Slaven

The new committee structure adopted by the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories is designed to help MLAs better deal with the difficult challenges they face by providing more involvement in the governing process. The NWT Legislature is the only one in Canada where there are no political parties. Under the new system, the Standing Committees on Finance, Legislation, Public Accounts, and Agencies, Boards and Commissions were eliminated and in their place, four new Standing Committees were created. This article looks at the new system.

In 1994, the Government of the NWT adopted the concept of grouping government departments into envelopes. Departments with similar mandates were put together to improve government-wide planning and budgeting. Three envelopes were created:

- Social Programs includes the departments of Health and Social Services; Education, Culture and Employment; Justice; and the NWT Housing Corporation;
- Resource Management and Development includes the departments of Economic Development and Tourism; Renewable Resources; Transportation; Safety and Public Services; and Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources;
- Infrastructure includes the departments of Finance; Public Works and Services; Municipal and Community Affairs; Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs; Executive; Personnel Secretariat; and the Financial Management Board Secretariat.

The new Standing Committee structure mirrors those envelopes. The Standing Committee on Social Programs, the Standing Committee on Resource Management and

Development, and the Standing Committee on Infrastructure each have the responsibility to review budgets, proposed legislation, bills, boards and agencies, public accounts, and division¹ issues specifically related to the departments within their respective envelopes. This way issues relating to a department are not split up among different committees (as was the case with the old committee structure). Each of these committees has five members

There are 24 Members of the NWT Legislative Assembly. One is elected as Speaker, eight serve on the Executive Council (Cabinet). The 15 ordinary MLAs serve on one of the three Standing Committees.

The chairmen and deputy chairmen of each of those three envelope Standing Committees sit on the Standing Committee on Government Operations. This Standing Committee totals seven members, the seventh being chairman Roy Erasmus, who was chosen to this post by the 15 ordinary MLAs.

The Government Operations Committee will review issues with government-wide implications, including overviews of the Government's budget and financial situation. It will also consider budgets, financial

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management, and appointments in areas that are outside the responsibility of other Standing Committees including the Legislative Assembly itself.

Two other Standing Committees continue unchanged from the previous Assembly. The Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures considers matters relating to the rules and procedures of the House, as referred to it by the Assembly. The Management and Services Board has the responsibility for the general administration of the Legislative Assembly, including financial authority and policy advice on organization and administration, and is chaired by the Speaker.

Each of the Standing Committees has a quorum of four. If regular committee members cannot attend a meeting there are alternates who can attend in their place. The Government Operations Committee's quorum has to include the Chairman or his Deputy, and at least one representative from each of the three envelope committees.

Review of Estimates

Estimates used to be reviewed by the Standing Committee on Finance (SCOF). Soon after the election of the 12th Assembly in 1991, it was decided that Capital Estimates and Main Estimates would be considered separately. The Capital Estimates would be considered in the fall, to allow Government departments and their contractors more time to prepare for the short construction season in the following summer. The Main Estimates would continue to be considered in the winter, as was previously the case for the entire budget.²

With the election of the 13th Assembly in October 1995, the new members chose to adopt a completely different way of developing and reviewing the Estimates, along with the new Standing Committee structure. It was expected that, without any changes, the pressures of forced growth and reduced revenues from the Federal Government would lead the NWT into a deficit position of \$150 million for 1996/97, out of total revenues of under \$1.2 billion. Members realised that correcting this problem would strain the abilities of the NWT's unique form of consensus government to the limit. At initial Caucus meetings (attended by all 24 Members) in November, Members agreed that the budget development process should involve all Members, not just Cabinet Ministers, as fully as possible. The new Standing Committee structure was one means to that end.

Departments are now instructed to prepare multi-year business plans, including both Capital and Operations and Maintenance expenditures, to be reviewed along with the estimates by the appropriate Standing

Committees. The process adopted for the review of the 1996/97 budgets and business plans is as follows:

- In late December first drafts of departmental business plans are delivered to the clerks of the Standing Committees. Committee staff review the plans and prepare briefing material.
- In January the Standing Committee on Government Operations meets for two days to review overall issues with the Premier and the Minister of Finance. The individual envelope Committees then spend about 10 days reviewing the draft business plans of the departments in their envelope. Each Committee drafts a confidential report which includes recommended changes to the business plans. Meanwhile, the Government Operations Committee similarly reviews agencies which fall outside the envelope structure (such as the Legislative Assembly itself, the Workers' Compensation Board, and so on), and prepares a similar report. The reports are presented to the Premier and the Minister of Finance, and passed back to the departments.
- In February second drafts of the business plans are delivered to the Committee clerks, and a similar review process takes place at the end of February.
- In early April final business plans, along with Estimates reflecting the business plans as amended, are presented to Committees for review.

Following this final review, the Estimates are presented to the House in early May, and the process should be complete by the end of the month.

In future years, this review process will be repeated, albeit between September and December. As well, since this is the first effort at this new process, there will likely be changes made once the review of the 1996/97 Estimates is completed. However, both Cabinet Ministers and ordinary Members have expressed approval and appreciation of the new process, and the opportunity it allows for all Members to participate fully in the development of the Government's estimates.

Notes

1. On April 1, 1999, the NWT will divide into two new territories. Nunavut will occupy that part of the NWT north and east of the treeline, and east of 115° W. The new western territory, as yet unnamed, will occupy the area south of the treeline and west of 115° W.
2. The old Timetable for Review of Estimates was as follows. In early September the Proposed Capital Estimates and 5-year Capital Plans were delivered to Standing Committee on Finance (SCOF). Committee staff reviewed documents provided by Cabinet and the Financial Management Board Secretariat (FMBS), and prepared briefing material for SCOF. The met for approximately 2-3 weeks to review Capital Estimates. After an initial day or two of reviewing briefing material prepared by Committee staff, the Committee

would meet with the Minister of Finance to discuss the overall direction of the Capital Plan. Then, individual Ministers would appear (generally assisted by their Deputy Ministers and Directors of Finance) to discuss their departments' Capital plans. Once all departments' plans had been reviewed, the Committee would sum up their discussions, and meet again with the Minister of Finance to discuss overall issues which may have arisen.

In late September the Committee staff drafted the Committee's Report on the Review of the Capital Estimates, and the Committee met to revise the draft report as necessary. In October the Minister of Finance introduced the Capital Estimates into the Assembly. A day or two later, the Chair of SCOF tabled the Committee's report. Shortly thereafter, review of the Estimates commenced in the Assembly, in Committee of the Whole. As with the SCOF meetings (which were not open to the public), each Minister would appear to discuss their departments' Capital plans. Based on Committee recommendations, the Capital plans may have been amended prior to introduction in the House, or deletions may be moved and carried

in Committee of the Whole. Typically, the process was complete by the end of November.

In late December Proposed Main Estimates were delivered to SCOF. Committee staff reviewed documents and prepared briefing material. In January SCOF met for approximately 3 weeks to review Main Estimates. The process was analogous to the review of the Capital Estimates. In late January Committee staff drafted the Committee's Report on the Review of the Main Estimates, and the Committee met to revise the draft report as necessary. In February-March the Minister of Finance introduced the Main Estimates into the Assembly. A day or two later, the Chair of SCOF tabled the Committee's report. The review process was, again, analogous to the review of the Capital Estimates. Typically, the process was complete by mid-March.

