
“The People’s Office”: Constituency Offices in the Far North

Roundtable with Michael Nadli, MLA, Frederick (Sonny) Blake Jr., MLA, and Kevin Menicoche, MLA

In this roundtable discussion, three MLAs from rural/northern parts of the Northwest Territories reflect on the unique challenges parliamentarians face when doing constituency work in remote communities. They explain that offices often tailor themselves to the needs of the community. For MLAs, an office helps to create work/life balance, offers a source of much-needed local employment, and provides an additional connection to the seat of government. They are also the office of last appeal for constituents frustrated by bureaucratic decisions.



Michael Nadli



Frederick (Sonny) Blake Jr.



Kevin Menicoche

Michael M. Nadli (MLA Deh Cho), served as Grand Chief of Deh Cho First Nations from August 1997 to June 2003. First elected to the Legislative Assembly in 2011, he is the Chair of Standing Committee on Government Operations. Frederick (Sonny) Blake Jr. (MLA Mackenzie Delta) served as the Chief and Mayor of Tsiigehtchic for two terms from 2007 to 2011. Since becoming an MLA in 2011 he has served as Deputy Chair of the Standing Committee on Economic Development and Infrastructure. Kevin Menicoche (MLA Nahendeh) was first elected in 2003 and re-elected in 2007 and 2011. He is a past Chair of the Standing Committee on Government Operations.

CPR: When you represent a geographically vast district, how do you decide where to set up your constituency office(s)? How do you balance where you spend your time?

Menicoche: It just so happens that the largest community in my riding is my home community of Fort Simpson and that’s where I have my constituency office. I often conduct three full tours of the communities and have a public meeting when I’m there. I do three trips per year. In between, the ministers travel

to the communities once or twice a year. It's all part of the consensus style of government. Each of these communities has a chief, two of mine have mayors, and two have Métis presidents. I'm dealing with 10 elected officials. In a more central riding like Hay River or Inuvik you're dealing with one mayor, potentially a Grand Chief and one Métis organization.

Nadli: I represent four communities with the farthest being about two and a half hours away by vehicle. The closest community is a 45-minute ride. When not in session or doing committee work, I spend the majority of my time in my home community so it was logical for me to set up a constituency office in my community. I also established a part-time office in the farthest community. When I travel to the communities of my riding, I start with the farthest community.

Blake: What I decided to do when elected was have an office in Fort McPherson because it is the largest community. The office had always been there and people appreciate that. I'm from Tsiigehtchic and there was a thought that I'd move it there. A lot of elders stop by every few days to see what's happening or if they have any concerns. Because we're in Yellowknife for an average of 100 days a year, I spend as much time at home with my family as I can. During the summer we have a lot of time to travel in our constituency. So I spend a lot of time in Fort McPherson and I attend a lot of events there and in the community of Aklavik. We have jamborees during Christmas and feasts and I also contribute to those feasts. We have to watch our budget and since I have to fly in to Aklavik, I really have to get my timing on there; though in the winter we can drive in and that helps a lot. Also, they have a gathering at the Beaufort Sea once a year. I went there last year and I was really happy with that.

CPR: When you travel to communities that don't have an office, where do you meet with constituents?

Blake: We usually have an arena or a hall that we can use.

Menicoche: Even though they're small, all our communities have an arena or hall or band office with meeting facilities. And before the meeting or after the meeting we'll visit the elders in their homes or yards

and speak to them on a one-to-one basis. In fact, one of the things I find with our Aboriginal constituents is that they're not ones to use email or phone calls or letters. They'd rather wait for you to visit and then tell you what their needs or their concerns are. Often they'll say, "Oh, I was waiting for you to show up because I had this thing going on." It's interesting.

CPR: Are there guidelines for establishing these offices? How did you decide what type of staff you needed and what types of services you would provide?

Nadli: Constituency Offices are established to ensure the MLA's presence in the community and riding. The design is at the discretion of the MLA, but we must follow policies and procedures of the Legislative Assembly. As I am not always in my office, it was important to have an experienced office worker and independent person as Constituency Assistant (CA). A prerequisite was understanding the local language of Deh Gah Got'ie Dene. Our office strives to be a place that the public can visit, to assist constituents with their concerns or issues, and also to support communities in their

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events and functions.

Blake: You have to have someone in the office who is able to work with everyone. It can be challenging in some of our smaller communities. I kept the CA for the former MLA. She also helped me when I ran for MLA, so it worked out pretty well. She's easy-going and knows pretty much the whole community, so that helps out a lot. Because we have smaller communities we tend to know more people in the communities we represent. And that really helps a lot too.

Menicoche: There are no specific guidelines, but we do have to work within our budget. I have someone on staff in the smaller communities as the community contact person, but having a central constituency office with a knowledgeable CA is important.

Blake: Similar to what Kevin mentioned, because I only represent three communities I have a contact person in the community. I can only pay \$500 a month, but they're happy with that because it's a part-time job. If anything comes up in the community, they let me know. If people have concerns, they'll sit down with them.

CPR: Parliamentarians representing urban districts can usually establish an office that is easy to access for their constituents. As an MLA representing a rural area, do you find that having a physical space from which to work in your riding is less important than access to a travel budget to visit various communities in it? Is more work handled by phone or email than by physically meeting with constituents? Are physical offices still a necessity?

Nadli: Having physical space and an office is important, to not only separate your home and work life, but to contribute to the local economy by renting office space and creating the position of a CA. Most northern communities have about 40 per cent unemployment. Depending on the nature of constituent concerns, it is better to discuss matters in person rather than by phone or email. For these reasons, I believe a physical office is a necessity.

Menicoche: The legislature has set it up that they'll pay for up to five trips to each community per year and that's not part of constituency budget, so we have lots of opportunity to travel to meet with people in person.

CPR: Do staff in rural/northern constituency offices tend to have a noticeably different caseload than their urban counterparts? Are the issues generally the same or are their unique issues in rural and northern areas that your offices encounter?

Blake: I think we have a lot more casework in our communities because we have a 35 per cent unemployment rate. Also, the facilities we have in our communities are not what they have in the larger communities, so the demand, whether it's health or education, is higher. There's a lot more pressure on our smaller communities because the service level is less.

Menicoche: I tend to concur. One of the things we share is the difficulty in getting nurses to our smaller communities, and MLAs representing larger centres probably wouldn't have that.

Blake: Another issue is the RCMP, along with the nurses. We have communities without RCMP detachments which means our residents have to be the first responders. It puts a lot of pressure on them.

CPR: Compared to your urban counterparts, are constituency offices and staff more difficult to maintain?

Nadli: The supply of office space is limited in rural communities.

Blake: And one of the things our constituents would like to see are more offices, possibly one for each community, but there's no money for that. We get a budget of roughly \$90,000 and if that were to double we could make things easier for our constituents by setting up more offices. That's one thing the people in our communities would like to see – a place in their own community for them to stop in.

CPR: In many other jurisdictions which have partisan systems, when individual MLAs/MPs leave office they do not pass along casework/records to their successors, and unless their replacement belongs to the same party the previous staff is replaced. In the Northwest Territories' non-partisan form of government, when one MLA is defeated or retires, is there more of a tradition of keeping previous staff or providing information and casework to the incoming member?

Nadli: This is my first term and I haven't experienced a 'passing of the torch' kind of transition, where the victor and loser of the election share files or maintain a tradition of keeping previous staff.

Blake: I think it varies with each MLA. The former MLA in my riding, who retired after 16 years, really helped out quite a bit

and gave me a heads' up about what was happening. One of the beautiful things about the consensus style of government is that we have a research staff here and all the information that the former MLAs have gone through is compiled in our research library. Any information is available to us.

Menicoche: The constituents like dealing with knowledgeable CAs, so it helps if they are well-briefed.

CPR: How do people in your ridings tend to see these offices? Are they the central way to access government services? Are they places to go when they have difficulty with the bureaucracy? Are they tangible symbols of the distant seat of the territorial government?

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Nadli: I believe people in my riding view our office as a place to go when they need help with their concerns. "The MLA's office" is a common remark that I hear, referencing our office situated downstairs in a local government building. There is also a Government Services Office which is supposed to be a one-stop shop for guiding the public through the various services provided by government. I think our office takes on the role of ombudsman from time to time. I prefer to view our constituency office as "the people's office."

Blake: To add to what Michael said, the government has recently created Government Service Offices in our communities and I am very fortunate to have two of these in the three communities I represent and soon there will be a third. That will be very helpful for a lot of our constituents to help with filling out forms for subsidies or other programs and services. But my constituency office doors are always open to help with any of these things too.

Menicoche: Michael and Sonny mentioned the government service workers. They're part-time in the small communities, but they are able to address some of the concerns constituents have in addressing government services or filling out forms. A lot of

people contact my office because they feel that the MLAs in the Northwest Territories are the appeal guys. "The government denied me this or that, what can I do about it? I'm appealing to you because I tried working with the bureaucracy or the regional manager and I didn't get the answer I want." We're seen as the appeal person – the office of last resort. I tell them that sometimes the answer is still no, but as an MLA I'll follow through for them. What I find is that when people aren't getting answers, they don't know what to do next. If they get a 'yes' the process continues, if they get a 'no' they know what to do, but at least give them an answer.

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CPR: Do you have any concluding thoughts about particular issues or challenges northern/rural MLAs face when doing constituency work?

Blake: I think one of the issues our smaller communities face is when people are about to get evicted. That comes up in a lot of our ridings. We are pretty much their last resort. A lot of times the ministers are flexible and tend to give the person one more opportunity to get into a payment plan. They really appreciate the help they receive from their MLAs and ministers in that situation. Otherwise they find themselves homeless or living with family members. I think that's one of the biggest challenges of our smaller communities.