

Representing The North

Dave Nickerson, MP

Members representing the North are often asked to describe the difficulties and challenges of representing such a vast and sparsely populated region. This article shows that despite a number of similarities with his southern counterpart, the task of the Northern legislator is worthy of some special consideration.

The most frequent question asked of the Northern MP is how do you manage to keep in touch with all the many small settlements in your riding? Those who suppose I spend most of my time travelling around by canoe or dogteam will be disappointed. It is fairly easy to visit the major centres by scheduled



The present Member of Parliament for the Western Arctic, David Nickerson is a former member of the NWT Legislative Assembly. Here he discusses a document with David Searle, Speaker during the Eighth Legislative Assembly.

airlines and the smaller ones by chartered aircraft. Time and budgetary restrictions are the major impediments, the most important being time, since Parliament sits for so many months of the year. It is only possible to visit some of the smaller communities once a year so you become quite practiced in apologetics. However, most people understand quite readily and improvements in both transportation and the allowances received by Members have to some degree ameliorated the problem.

Those who believe that politicians like tax collectors are a necessary evil that should be kept to a minimum, ought never to poke their heads above the sixtieth parallel. With a population of some 43,000 souls — not even a fair sized city in the south — the Northwest Territories has one senator, two MPs, twenty-two MLAs

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and countless municipal mayors and councillors not to mention several native organizations and a multiplicity of semi-autonomous boards and committees which deal with everything from caribou management to hospital finance.

On a per-capita basis more people must make a living practicing the art of politics in the North than in any other part of the world. Each political body, of course, has its own bureaucracy. It is not hard to understand why "government" is the principal industry in the Territories with the budget of the NWT government alone amounting to \$10,000. for each man, woman and child under its jurisdiction. If you want to see the direction Canada as a whole is going look to the North. It has been used as the federal proving ground for its social theories for several years.

If it was true fifteen years ago, as A.W.R. Carrothers found in his milestone report on the North, that the people of the Territories were the least politically aware of all Canadians, then today the very opposite is true. We must now be the most politically aware people in the nation.

Not only do we have our own home-grown politicians but every summer we are subject to the annual migration, usually coincident with the fishing season, of plane loads of MPs and assorted dignitaries, not infrequently headed by the Prime Minister. At times federal cabinet ministers are a dime a dozen on the streets of Yellowknife.

Fish in Various Sized Ponds

When I was the MLA for the sophisticated and urban riding of Yellowknife North I often-times wondered with a touch of amusement (hopefully well concealed) why some of my colleagues from the outlying areas would insist in raising questions of such seemingly mundane and purely local significance as, for example, the appointment of dog catchers. The answer is quite simple. In settlements which had not yet achieved some level of municipal self-government dog catchers were a matter under the jurisdiction of the Territorial authorities.

Now I hope my colleagues in the House of Commons are as adept at concealing their bemusement when I am compelled to raise issues such as angling licences and minor labour disputes in that august chamber. Despite the plentitude of politicians and public servants in the North, the fact remains that federal authorities have been reluctant to transfer the responsibility and jurisdiction which ought to go hand with the development of representative and responsible government. Even worse they have often engaged in partial transfers leading to two levels of government dealing with the same question. However, empires have to be maintained!

Perhaps the most unusual feature of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories is that members actually listen to each others' speeches, an occurrence which has never been known to happen in the House of Commons! Not only that but on occasions it is possible to sway an issue by logic, reason and force of argument, (whereas in the Commons these things are settled by force of numbers). The small size (twenty-two members) is one reason.

Another is the absence of political parties. While the virtue of relative smallness can probably be retained it is unlikely sweet innocence of the party pork barrel will prevail much longer. In fact the absence of formal support in the Legislature for the executive (or cabinet) members who are selected at large by their colleagues, rather than being appointed by a party leader, makes life somewhat precarious as can well be imagined. The question is not so much as to whether party politics will come to the Territories but when and whether it will be an organic development stemming from within the local legislature or one imposed by the existing party structure outside.

With 282 members the House of Commons is an unwieldy entity and it is surprising that it works at all let alone as well as it does. Proposed increases will make it even more unwieldy and again dilute the part played by individual members. In the Territorial legislature it is quite possible for private members to initiate practically any item of business, with the exception of money bills, and see the item brought to a conclusion. Because of the small numbers each member has the opportunity to speak to any matter under discussion. Hence speeches tend to be somewhat more to the point than in the Commons and closure or time allocation, which are rapidly becoming almost routine procedures in the senior House, have never been used.

For anyone who has served time in both the most junior as well as the most senior legislature in the nation it is well nigh impossible to refrain from making comparisons but the ambitious politician can only conclude that it is better to be a big fish in a large pond rather than a small one.

Communication Problems

The real political issues in the North — the ones on which you can win or lose an election — the ones which affect the average voter in his or her pocketbook or affect the way he or she can make a living — are very much the same as throughout the rest of Canada. This, of course, is not really appreciated by Southern editors who want stories to titillate their readers or to create issues which might be fashionable in academic or intellectual Southern circles, but hardly deemed worthy of public debate in the North.

As a consequence the Northern legislator finds himself ignored on issues such as Northern tax reform, municipal finance, responsible government and oil and gas royalties all of which are not far removed from like issues in the South. He is, however, bombarded with questions about polar bears, caribou and igloos. Anything to do with race relations, especially if portrayed in a diabolical light, seems to be popular with the Southern press and particularly with the CBC. I recall speaking with a journalist who had been covering a day's debate of the Legislative Assembly when it had been thrashing through a new *Education Ordinance*. He confided in me that he was most disappointed because he had been sent to the North to get a story on conflict between the white and native people.

An article on a cooperative effort to come up with the best education legislation for all just would not sell newspapers.

It is also unfortunate that the CBC is the sole source of local television and radio news in many Northern communities. The CBC has its own style of presentation (one would not want to accuse them of bias) and all too frequently they tend to present Northern news from a Southern viewpoint. This is due largely to their transient staff who often only reside in the North for a short period before being transferred back to Southern operations. Again, of late, some improvements have been made and CBC Inuvik can be cited as an example where most of the staff are now long term Northerners.

The telephone system and the post office are other vital means of communications for the North. The latter can at times leave something to be desired. For instance all my Christmas mail to the Mackenzie Delta, which was sent several days before the government fell in 1979, eventually arrived on St. Valentine's Day, 1980, four days before the next general election!

Canada in Microcosm

Members of Parliament are often asked whether their riding is urban or rural; industrial or residential; upper, middle or lower class (whatever that is supposed to mean); Protestant or Catholic and so forth. Most members can answer these questions with some degree of certainty but the only answer you can give for the Western Arctic is that it is everything all rolled into one. The Western Arctic federal constituency comprises about eleven territorial constituencies which have been designed to ensure some community of interest internally but which frequently have little in common with each other. For example, one territorial riding might be a mining town, the second a section of a city largely made up of public servants and the third a region inhabited by people who live by the traditional pursuits of hunting and trapping.

Indeed such an area is not unlike Canada in miniature and calls for a judicious design of policy if it is to be acceptable to the majority. Whereas it is fairly easy for the representative of a western agricultural district to reflect his constituents' thinking about the Crow rate or for the Ottawa member to tailor his sentiments towards the *Public Service Staff Relations Act*, the northern member does not enjoy any such luxury. The only issue where he can be sure of the united stand of his constituents is in his opposition to the semi-colonialism being practiced against the north by the government in Ottawa. Even here we are not short of differing suggestions as to with what to replace the universally discredited system.

These then are some of both the frustrations and challenges of being a northern legislator; the job might have drawbacks but on balance it is full of interest and reward. It is certainly one I do not intend to give up without a fight!