

Interview

When Charlie Crow, Member of the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly for Hudson Bay, travels to Yellowknife for sessions or meetings, his route takes him from his home community of Sanikiluaq to Montreal, Toronto, Edmonton and, finally, Yellowknife with a change of planes at each stop.

The journey Mr. Crow makes regularly would be arduous for any legislator but Charlie Crow is blind, one of only two blind MLAs to have been elected to Canadian legislatures. The following interview with Mr. Crow was conducted in July 1988 by Craig James and Gary Levy and supplemented by additional information provided by Ann Taylor.



You were first elected to the NWT Legislative Assembly in 1987 but you were active before that in politics. Could you tell us about your early life?

I was born in the Richmond Gulf area on the Quebec side of the Hudson Bay coast. My dad worked for the Hudson's Bay Company and was asked if he wanted to be transferred to the Belcher Islands trading post. He agreed and we moved to the Belcher Islands in 1954 but I was beginning to have problems with my eyes, even though I still had some sight. I spent a year in hospital in Moose Factory, Ontario and then went back home for a year but I was suffering from glaucoma complicated by tuberculosis and I lost my sight when I was about thirteen years old in 1956.

In 1958 I was sent to the Ontario School for the Blind at Brantford, Ontario, to get an education. That was the very first time I went to school because there were none where I was born.

It was very difficult to go home for summer holidays because there was no transportation. The only way to get to the Belcher Islands is to fly or by boat. I remember one summer – my dad had to charter a whale boat to get me home for the summer vacation. That was in 1959 and I only spent about three weeks at home before the government decided to charter a boat from a nearby community so that I could go back to school again. Despite the difficulties I learned English. I had picked up some in the hospital, listening to the nurses but to learn to speak I had to go to school. I also learned to read braille at the school.

In 1963 I decided I did not want to go back to school. I was twenty years old then. It was difficult for me to adjust to the life we had on the Belcher Islands after spending five years in a school.

The first year I had nothing at all to do but in 1964 I met one of the Anglican ministers who used to come around to our community two or three times a year. He got me involved in interpreting because I was capable of speaking both English and Inuktitut.

The doctors or nurses or the RCMP came over if they needed someone to help them speak to the people.

When did you first get interested in politics?

In those days the people on the Belcher Islands lived in two camps. One was at the northern end of the Island and the other was at the southern end. The Hudson Bay store where my Dad was manager was in the northern camp. It was a trading post where people could sell soapstone carvings or the fox hides they trapped during the winter.

I lived on the northern end of the Island because that is where The Bay was and the majority of the people lived there – about 160 in all. I also travelled to the southern part of the island when there was interpreting to be done. The federal government built a one-classroom school, at the southern end and, of course, people from the north end wanted their children to go to school but did not want to send them to the south end of the Island.

Instead they send them to Great Whale River on the Quebec side on

the mainland. Their children used to go to school in Great Whale nine months of the year and if the kids wanted a higher education, they had to be sent to Churchill, Manitoba, where the government had a vocational centre.

In 1968 we had a teacher who decided to hold an adult education class and he asked me if I was interested in interpreting for him. During those classes the teacher would explain about government, how the government works, and tried to get people interested in forming a council.

He and I used to travel, as he had an adult education class at the southern end, where the school was, for one week and then came up for the weekend to the northern end for these same classes. We did that until, I think, the end of April. By then the people decided that it would be a good idea to organize and start a community council. We not only learned how government works but also about co-operative movements and how people could organize themselves and start small businesses of their own.

People wanted to do two things at the same time. They wanted to form a council and also form a co-operative movement on the Island. Of course, the teacher had to transmit everything he was doing to Ottawa and he asked for some government officials to come to the Belcher Islands to see and talk to the people. The first community council was elected in June 1968 as a result of those adult education classes.

Around the same time a co-op was formed. It was really difficult in those first few years because there were two camps and we had to come up with some sort of system. The community council decided to have seven members on the council with three to be elected from the south end of the Island because the camp was smaller there and four from the north end and for council meetings to travel back and forth. I did the interpreting for them.

What distances are we talking about here?

It was only about 65 miles but it was very difficult in those days because snowmobiles just were being introduced. I remember one winter we were taking a doctor, nurse, and chest x-ray crew to x-ray all the people to make sure they did not have T.B. We decided to hire five skidoos at the north end of the Island and we loaded up all the x-ray machines, plus the doctor, nurse, an Anglican minister from Great Whale, and myself. The RCMP police came too on that charter.

We were about half way to the south end of the Island and all the skidoos broke down. In those days people didn't know much about these new machines or how to repair them. Finally we managed to get one skidoo going again and that took us almost to the camp at South Belcher before it broke down again. We had to walk the rest of the way.

Transportation was also a problem when it came to having council meetings or co-op meetings. During the summer it was easier. The federal government brought in a long liner – a large boat and that was used to transport the councillors or co-op directors to their meetings. The government considered this a bit of a problem so they finally asked the people, "Why don't you put your two camps together and make one community, so you would not have to travel back and forth to meetings?"

Around this same time the federal government decided to hand over their responsibility for the Belcher Islands to the Territorial Government. In 1970 the Government of the Northwest Territories met with the people from both camps and told us that it would be much easier to serve people if we lived together in one community. People thought that was a good idea but we had to decide which camp was to move. The majority prevailed and the South Belcher people had to move because they were a minority of only 90 people whereas our camp had about 160. The northern community was then called Sanikiluaq.

The Territorial Government took down all government buildings including the one-classroom school, the teacher's house and a few other

buildings, and transported them to the north end of the island. I think there were about five one-bedroom houses for the elderly people. In those days people called them "matchbox" houses because they were so tiny. They were about twenty feet long and maybe twelve feet wide. Also that year the government brought in fifteen new three-bedroom houses so the community grew that summer. They managed to put them all up before Christmas of 1970.

We had an election for our council around June of every year. The first year I did not run for council because I was involved with interpreting whenever anything had to be done. The second year, in 1969, I was asked, "Why don't you run for council?". I thought it might be a good idea so I decided to run in June 1969. I managed to beat someone and I got onto the council.

We did not have too many problems; we were concerned mainly with how to keep our community clean and how to get more houses from the government.

During my second year on council I was elected Chairman and held that position for two years. I started travelling to meet with government people. We had to go to Churchill in Manitoba as we were part of the Keewatin, one of five regions in the Territories.

There we met regularly with members from different communities, in the rest of Keewatin but it was difficult for us because the dialect was so different. Although we were all Inuit, their dialect is much different than ours. We have a northern Quebec dialect.

That created problems in communication. People in the Keewatin Region, from communities such as Eskimo Point, Rankin Inlet, Baker Lake, Coral Harbour, Whale Cove, and Chesterfield Inlet met together and demanded that the Regional Headquarters be moved out of Manitoba and into the Northwest Territories. The Government agreed and moved the Headquarters to Rankin Inlet in 1975. The people on the Belcher Islands had to decide what to do. The government had

moved the headquarters but it was quite a bit further north. Did we want to go to Rankin Inlet to meet with the government people or did we want to join Quebec as we were very close to the Quebec border. Or, did we want to be part of the Baffin Region? The decision had to be made so it was decided that we would become part of the Baffin Region. This was in 1975. I was quite involved at that time on the council. As part of the Baffin Region so we had to go to Frobisher Bay (now called Iqaluit) for our meetings. This meant that every time we met we had to all fly down to Montreal and spend at least one night there.

Territorial elections were held every four years. Willie Adams, now a Senator, was one of the Inuit members of the Keewatin district who was elected in 1971. As the MLA for the Region he had to meet with us regularly. When the 1975 election was called, some people on the Island asked me to run for the Assembly. I allowed my name to stand and I remember that, just to file my nomination papers I had to fly to Montreal, overnight in Winnipeg, and then go from Winnipeg to Churchill to Rankin Inlet. I managed to reach Rankin Inlet an hour before the nominations closed.

There were three of us running for that district of eight small communities. There was Gary Smith and Peter Ermerk. Smith was a businessman who lived in Baker Lake the largest community in that region with a population of over 900. Eskimo Point was the next largest point with about 700 people, Rankin Inlet about 500 and my own community had just under 400 in 1975.

I definitely had to get people in my community to work for me. When I filed my nomination papers, I decided that I should visit some of the communities in that region to campaign and I spent a couple of nights at Rankin Inlet and flew up to Baker Lake for another few nights and also visited Eskimo Point. I managed to visit the three largest communities although there were three or four smaller communities which I did not get to because of transportation problems.

Just before election day, I flew home via Winnipeg and Montreal. I think election day was March 10, 1975 and people were really interested in the results. I think most of the 123 eligible voters in my community voted for me but overall Peter Ermerk defeated me by 57 votes in the whole region.

After that election I became more involved in local politics. At one time I led some delegations from my community to Ottawa. On one trip we met with Postmaster General Bryce Mackasey for about an hour to express our wishes for better mail service. We met with the Canadian Transport Committee to seek better air service transportation.

In 1979 the Belcher Islands was given its own seat in the Territorial Assembly but you declined to run again?

I was asked if I wanted to run but I declined. Again in 1983 people were trying to force me to run and one even gave me \$200.00 to pay for my nomination papers but I decided I was not interested at that time. I had just got married and I was more interested in living on the land – camping – for those first nine years. My wife would do some soapstone carvings, we would do some fishing. I was enjoying that life. I would do some interpreting for the court at times.

In 1973 the co-op decided they wanted to start a community radio station to have better communication between the people so they bought radio equipment, turntable, tape recorder, microphone and transmitter. They asked me to do the announcing and to operate the radio station. I did that for four years.

In 1977 I decided I had enough of meetings for a while. I had been involved in council for 8 years and the last couple were difficult for me because, as the community became larger, more community organizations were formed such as the education advisory council, community recreation committee, and housing committee and, of course, I was appointed to most of them. One year I was involved with six different

committees, along with being deputy mayor of the council.

I remember I had a meeting every night of the week. I became really tired of that so I decided to end the radio announcing job and also the community council committees and spend more time on the land and with my wife.

Again in 1983 I was asked if I wanted to run for the Legislative Assembly and I declined but in 1985 I decided I had better start looking for a job because my wife was earning all our money from soapstone carving but food and everything else was getting expensive.

I decided to again become involved in Council and went back to the radio station announcing job. They needed someone they could rely on. The Broadcasting Society had difficulty keeping their radio announcers because they were hiring young people who did not want to stay with the job for any length of time.

I was a radio announcer up until I was elected to the Legislature in October 1987.

How was this election compared to your earlier experience?

The election was called for October 5, 1987, and the incumbent Moses Appaqaq was interested in running again although some people were really disgusted with him. In 1979, when we had our first seat, there were only two candidates; in 1983 there were six candidates and in 1987 there were five – myself, the incumbent and three other men.

Since we had our own seat of Hudson Bay there were only 220 eligible voters this time and I won with 96 votes compared to 46 for Mr. Appaqaq.

How did you find the Legislative Assembly compared to the local council? Was it much more difficult?

Of course, the Legislative Assembly is completely different from the council meetings I was used to back home. You have to wear a suit during the Assembly sittings and you have to

be on time for the meetings. You are involved with different committees and you meet from early morning until early evening. It was a bit difficult for me for the first couple of weeks but I got used to it and the more I got into it, the more I enjoy it.

Shortly after my election the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, David Hamilton, was asked by the CBC, "How are you going to manage Mr. Crow?" Because I was blind they wondered how I was going to be given some information, written information.

Mr. Hamilton contacted the Canadian National Institute of the Blind in Edmonton and asked them how they could help a new MLA who was blind but could read braille. The CNIB in Edmonton gave him information about braille printers, braille computers, talking computers and other technology for blind people.

The first and most important thing at the time was how to get the rules and procedures of the Legislative Assembly into braille. It took between three to four weeks to do that. The Management and Services Board of the Legislative Assembly decided to authorize purchase of a braille printer and computer, and that is how they have been feeding me information.

I also have an Assistant, Goo Arlooktoo, who escorts me to my seat in the Chamber daily and makes certain I receive telephone messages and other information necessary during the daily sittings of the Assembly. Between sessions, he attends committee and other meetings with me and ensures I am kept up to date on developments of interest to Members.

The NWT area representative of the CNIB, Anne de Weerd, was also of great assistance by preparing a three-dimensional floor plan of the Legislative Assembly Chamber, the Members' Lounge and the offices to

aid in finding my way around the building. The CNIB has provided a small lap computer to take notes which can then be reproduced in braille or by voice simulation.

What about representing your constituents? How often are you able to go back and what types of problems do they have?

I am lucky in that way because I just have the one community. Some MLAs represent five or six small communities in their region. I think the largest riding is Yellowknife South which has about six thousand people. In my riding there is only one community and of course I know everybody in the community. At times I go on the local radio and report to them on meetings I have attended.

I am open to them, of course, on any kind of help they might want from me as an MLA. They keep me really busy. Elderly people call needing information on how to go about solving their problems. One of the major problems I have to try to resolve is related to territorial government versus mainly federal government responsibilities. For example, I had about five mothers telephone me after I returned from Yellowknife, telling me that they had children but were not receiving family allowance cheques and asking, "How can you help me?" I had to tell them to inform Ottawa in order to receive the family allowance cheques. Some people come to me for help with their income tax return forms and some come to me and say, "For some reason I owe some money to the government." These people, in some years, earn too much so they have to pay tax to Ottawa. This is difficult for people who do not read English. When I look at the information they give me, I can see that they have not paid the tax and in some cases interest has been accumulating. I have had to look into that kind of problem for people.

Can they not ask the federal member to look after some of these things?

Well, it's very difficult to contact your MP from my small community. The fellow who represents us now has to travel to thirty-odd communities in the federal riding and it is a pretty difficult job.

Usually, with these kinds of problems, I talk to the government liaison officer in the community. There are also the social services people to help. The other main problem we have is a shortage of housing. That has been a real problem, too.

Does your wife take an active role in solving some of problems in dealing with the Assembly and with constituents?

She is very helpful to me, especially when travelling. She helps me get to meetings in the community, or if I have to go to the radio station, she takes me. If I have a problem that I can't look after on my own, I try to contact appropriate people to solve those problems and if I can't find anyone in the community then I go to the regional office in Iqaluit or, if necessary, I have to go to Yellowknife.

I have hired a constituency assistant to read all my mail onto a tape - I get a lot of mail from different organizations in the Baffin Region. She reads it to me then I can get back to the person who wrote to me. The only problem was I have not been able to get a special tape recorder. I wanted a tape recorder, that had two speeds, slow and regular. It is not possible to put everything into braille for me, even though there is a braille printer in Yellowknife. The most important things are put into braille; letters from Ministers or some documents dealing with proposed legislation, but there are some other things that I would like to have read to me and we could use the tape recorder in those instances. ■