
Looking to the Future: A New Legislative Building for the NWT

by David Hamilton

The public life of Canada's Northwest Territories is undergoing a dramatic change. The Legislative Assembly has authorized the design and construction of a permanent Legislative Assembly Building in which the people of the Northwest Territories will have a focal point for the pursuit of their common future. The Legislative Assembly building project entails the ownership, financing, design and operation of the proposed 46,000 square foot facility. It will be located on the Capital Site, a parcel of land overlooking Frame Lake in the heart of the City of Yellowknife

Representative and responsible government in Canada's North is not a recent phenomenon. Before the turn of the century, the old Northwest Territories had government based on two key concepts of Canadian democracy - representation and responsibility. From 1881 its Legislative Assembly was fully elected and, from 1897, the Assembly had a formally constituted Executive Council which was accountable to the Assembly for the conduct of government.

The old Northwest Territories, which became part of Canada in 1870, included what is now the Northwest Territories, Yukon, Alberta, Saskatchewan, most of Manitoba, northern Ontario and northern Quebec. The Arctic Islands were added in 1880. In 1905, after pressure from the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly led the federal government to establish the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, the remaining Northwest

Territories went back to the status of a colony run from Ottawa, as it had been in the early 1870s.

The *Northwest Territories Act* had provided for a four-member appointed council to assist the federally-appointed Commissioner but no members were named to the council until 1921. All were federal civil servants living in Ottawa. The *Northwest Territories Act* was again amended and six senior civil servants representing federal departments with an interest in the North were appointed to the council. This council acted more as an interdepartmental committee than as a legislative body.

Public business was conducted from Ottawa between 1905 and 1967, when the seat of government moved to Yellowknife. Even then, the NWT did not enjoy a permanent place of assembly. MLAs spent years conducting the public business of the Territory in school gymnasias, banquet halls and other temporary facilities.

By 1970, only four federal appointees remained on the fourteen-member council. Amendments to the *Northwest Territories Act* allowed Council to decide the

David Hamilton is Clerk of the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly.

qualifications of electors and its Members, to set their indemnities and to develop a separate Consolidated Revenue Fund.

In 1975, the first fully-elected Legislative Assembly took office, featuring a majority of Dene, Métis and Inuit Members. With the welcome return of representative and accountable government came the challenge of physically accommodating the Assembly, its Members and the usual range of support services.

For the past 26 years, the Legislative Assembly has out of necessity operated from temporary and leased premises. The public business of the NWT was conducted in Yellowknife and across the NWT in schools, banquet halls, hotels and other facilities.

The people of the NWT were, in effect, tenants in their own home.

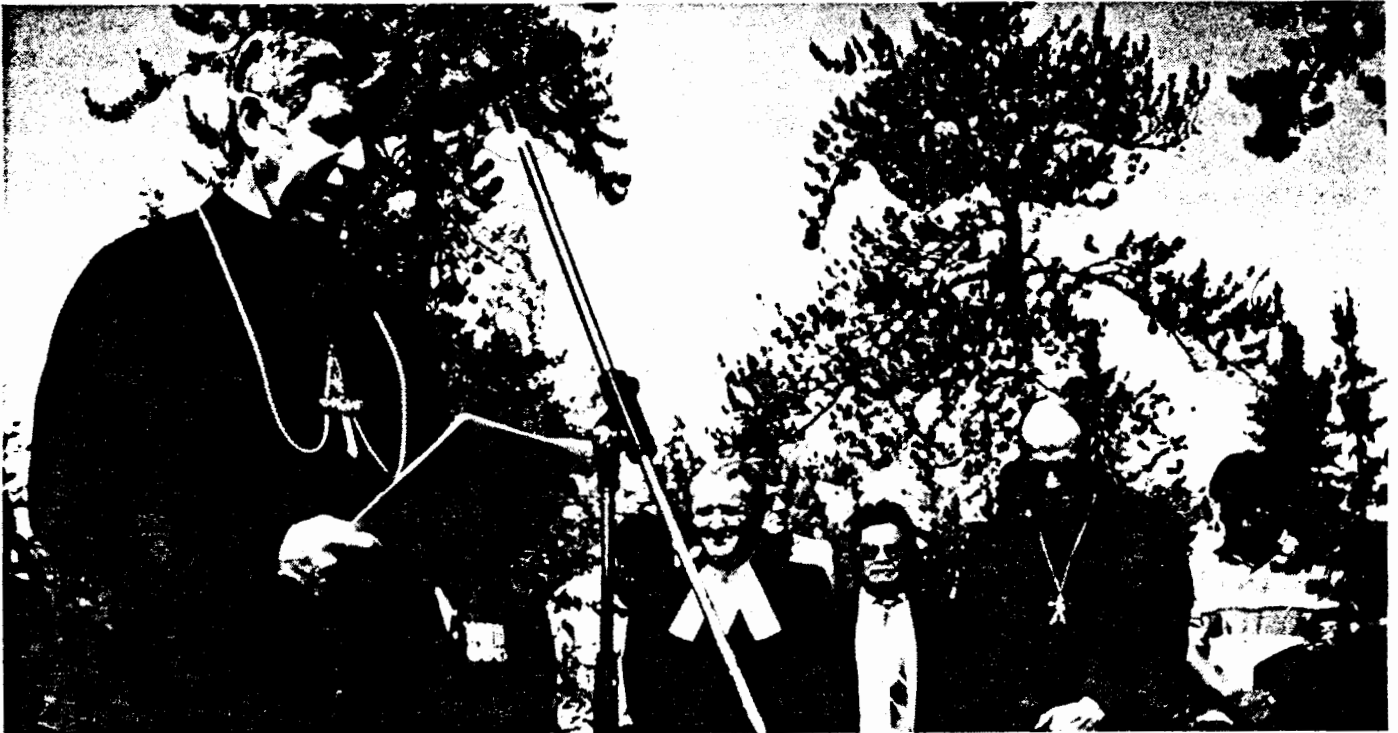
At the same time, the demands upon Members of the Legislative Assembly, the responsibilities transferred from Ottawa and even the number of MLAs within the Assembly increased considerably. It became clear that a solution was required to the costly, time-consuming and

temporarily arrangements for housing the Assembly and its support services.

In January 1990, the 24 elected MLAs, acting in the interest of the community, agreed that the people of the NWT required a permanent Legislative Assembly building to replace the temporary facilities that had been outgrown. The Legislative Assembly building project entails the design, financing, construction, ownership and operation of the future permanent home of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories.

Completion of the facility is scheduled for occupancy in the fall of 1993. The project is designed to reflect the unique interests and diverse population of the NWT and to encourage the participation of as many citizens as possible. These objectives are pursued in the following ways:

First, the project was initiated in the name and on behalf of the people of the Northwest Territories by their elected representatives. This new place of assembly will reflect the vision and needs of the members of the Legislative Assembly itself. The Government of the NWT is neither a force behind nor a beneficiary of the project as the new building will not house any of the departments or other operations of government. Instead, it is intended to enable MLAs to carry out their legislative



The site dedication ceremony was held June 27, 1991.
(Department of Culture and Communications, Government of the N.W.T.)



Shown here with a plaque commemorating the site dedication ceremony are former Speaker, Richard Nerysoo; Law Clerk, Shella MacPherson; Clerk of Committees, Doug Schauerte; Clerk, David M. Hamilton; and Clerk Assistant, Rhoda Perkison. (Department of Culture and Communications, Gov't of the N.W.T.)

duties and to efficiently and effectively represent their constituents.

Second, the building will accommodate the offices and services required for the proper functioning of the Assembly and the ongoing contact between MLAs, constituents, organizations and the people of the Northwest Territories. An extensive needs analysis has

been undertaken to determine the particular services and facilities to be incorporated into the Legislative Assembly building.

Third, the financing of the building is designed to encourage the active involvement of people and organizations throughout the North. The Legislative Assembly reviewed a number of financing options as



Members of the Eleventh Legislative Assembly at the site dedication ceremony. (Department of Culture and Communications, Gov't of the N.W.T.)

The new Speaker of the Legislative Assembly is Michael Ballantyne. Born in 1945 he was educated in Ottawa. After attending Carleton University he worked and travelled in Labrador, Yukon, Africa, Asia and South America. He taught in Brazil and Ethiopia and worked for the Save the Children Fund in Vietnam and Cambodia until the last days of the war.

First Elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1983 he was subsequently re-elected in 1987 and 1991. He has held a number of Portfolios including Minister of Justice, Minister of Finance and Government House Leader. He has also served on many legislative committees including the Special Committee on Aboriginal Languages and the Special Committee on Housing.

He was elected Speaker of the 12th Legislative Assembly in November 1991. (*Department of Culture and Communications, Gov't of the N.W.T.*)



part of its deliberations. The Assembly selected and authorized a lease-to-own program. The building will be financed through a 20 year conventional mortgage. In addition, investors throughout the NWT have the exclusive opportunity to participate in the project through the purchase of bonds offering very attractive rates of return. This is designed to spread the financial cost of the facility over a considerable period of time. It also ensures that the people of the NWT will end up owning an asset in the form of the new building as opposed to continuing to pay rent without any tangible return. At the end of the 20 year lease period, ownership of the building will be transferred to the Assembly.

Fourth, individuals, groups and businesses throughout the Territory will have an additional opportunity to become involved in this unique and exciting project through the purchase of memberships in a Building Society established for this project. This organization was formed on June 15, 1990 to finance the design and construction of the project and provide ownership of the building throughout the 20 year lease period. There are four categories of membership in the society: life membership throughout the entire project; general membership which may be renewed on an annual basis; group membership suitable for school classrooms, youth and other organizations; and, associate membership available to non-residents of the

NWT. Members in the society will have the opportunity to be advised of the progress made throughout the life of the project and will be eligible to attend and participate in the annual meeting(s) of the society itself.

The founding members and initial board of directors of the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly Building Society represent a distinguished and broad base of support for the building project. They also bring a range of experiences and credentials to their responsibilities. John Parker, former Commissioner of the NWT, serves as the Chairman and permanent appointee of the Legislative Assembly to the Board of the Society. The range of Northerner and Northern organizations represented on the board include native Dene, Inuit and Metis development companies, cooperatives, other corporations, former senior members of the Territorial public service and Government agencies.

Fifth, the design of, and materials used to build, this special facility will reflect the land and both the unity and diversity of the people who will benefit from this permanent place of assembly. Extensive research and consultations have been conducted to ensure that the design and construction of the building will reflect the land and serve the people of the NWT in the best possible manner.

