
The Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly Building: Honouring our Past and Embracing our Future

Don Couturier

This article looks at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly building and discusses the political developments that led to its construction.

“In this country you have a greater chance of seeing a total eclipse of the sun than you do of seeing the opening of a new legislative building. This is only the third time this century, and only one more will be built in our lifetime. We’ll see you in Nunavut in 1999.”

-Michael Ballantyne, Speaker of the 12th Legislative Assembly; speech delivered at the opening of the legislative building on November 17, 1993.

On November 1, 2013, the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories held a public celebration to commemorate 20 years since the opening of its legislative building. Former and current Commissioners, Premiers, Speakers, Members, and Clerks of the Legislative Assembly gathered with the public to pay tribute to the territory’s unique political heritage, historical evolution, and permanent home.

The phrase “permanent home” is particularly noteworthy, since the majority of the NWT’s political dealings in the last hundred years have occurred in temporary and often ad hoc quarters. Indeed, the construction of the legislative building was a landmark moment in the territory’s history, and one that signaled the arrival of its political maturity. No longer would the Assembly be tenants in their own land, confined to renting temporary space to house and conduct its business. As Canada’s second-youngest legislature,

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the building also symbolizes the territory’s long and winding journey through colonial administration. It is a symbol of the territory’s efforts to break free from such arrangements and achieve its own unique blend of responsible and consensus government, elected representation, and political autonomy.

Twenty years ago, when the Right Honourable Jean Chrétien stood in the Legislature’s Chamber and announced the official opening of the building to the people of the NWT, they knew they had taken an irreversible step toward these goals. Although the push to devolve powers from the federal government would continue, they knew that from that point on the Legislative Assembly would become the most important symbol of public government in the territory. Set against this backdrop, the 20th anniversary of the Legislative Assembly building was a momentous occasion designed to highlight these milestones and the people who helped bring them about. It was also an opportunity to bring the public and their elected representatives together to celebrate the building’s beautiful structure, as well as the final mortgage payment.

Historical and Political Development

The construction of the legislative building was significant given the way in which government administration has evolved in the territory. Although the Northwest Territories had responsible government in the late 19th century (representatives from other parts of Canada were elected to govern the territory at that time), from 1905 the affairs of the NWT were handled either by a Commissioner based in Ottawa, a council comprised of appointed public servants, or some combination of the two.



The Yellowknives Dene First Nation Drummers open the 20th anniversary celebration with a ceremonial drum prayer.

In 1951, when the *Northwest Territories Act* was amended, some form of representative government was restored, with three members from the Mackenzie District elected to the Territorial Council. In 1965, Abe Okpik of Frobisher Bay (Iqaluit) became the first Aboriginal member appointed to the Council, and shortly thereafter in 1966 three eastern arctic ridings were established.

By 1966, the balance had begun to shift, and by the time the Carrothers Commission called for a return to responsible government, there were seven elected and five appointed members on the Council. Still, political authority was held by Ottawa through the powers afforded to the Commissioner. In 1967, Yellowknife was named the capital and the seat of government formally moved there from Ottawa, led by Commissioner Stuart Hodgson. It was not until 1975 that the first fully elected Council took office with 15 members in total (and for the first time in Canada's history, the legislative body contained a majority of Dene, Métis, and Inuit Members).

In 1980, the position of Leader of Elected Members (a title that eventually changed to Premier), was created and held by George Braden. By 1981, the number of elected representatives had increased to 24, with seven members on the Executive Council. The creation of a fully elected Council was a crucial step that allowed the NWT to begin contributing to and shaping the landscape of federal politics. For example, in 1982 a delegation of MLAs from the NWT, led by Government Leader George Braden, travelled to Ottawa and lobbied the federal government to include Aboriginal rights in the repatriated constitution. Replete with eleventh hour diplomacy and backroom negotiations, this would become the NWT's first instance of engaging in Executive Federalism.

In 1987, shortly after then-Commissioner John Parker transferred executive power from the Commissioner to the Executive Council, the 11th Legislative Assembly approved a motion giving the Government Leader authority for the overall management and direction of the executive branch of government. In 1990, a year before Nellie Cournoyea would become the first

Aboriginal female Premier in Canada's history, Speaker Richard Nerysoo announced that the construction of the legislative building would commence.

Throughout its history, the Legislative Assembly had faced immense logistical challenges while conducting business. Made up of remote communities, containing huge geographic constituencies, and home to the sparsest population in Canada, the NWT's Legislative Assembly was tasked with the formidable challenge of representing 64,000 people in an area over 3,000,000 square kilometers in size (comparatively, the riding of St. Paul's in Ontario is comprised of 116,463 people in just 15 square kilometers).

To accommodate this geographic configuration, the Legislative Assembly travelled throughout the territory, holding sessions in different communities with varying degrees of administrative support. Since 1951, sessions have been held in communities as diverse as Ottawa, Inuvik, Frobisher Bay, Fort Smith, Yellowknife, Rankin Inlet, and Norman Wells in school gymnasiums, banquet halls, and hotel board rooms. The Speaker's Chair would be disassembled, carted around the territory, and set up in different locations as needed.

The mace, an elaborate work of art constructed by nine Inuit artisans from Cape Dorset, perpetually toured the territory. The Assembly was grappling with how to best provide democratic representation to the people of the NWT without a focal point for their political endeavors. As political power steadily devolved from Ottawa to the territory, the demands placed on the Assembly increased, as did the cost of housing the Assembly temporarily. As former Clerk David Hamilton noted, "[i]t became clear that a solution was required to the costly, time-consuming and temporary arrangements for housing the Assembly and its support services."

The construction of the legislative building was a natural and much-needed progression. Not only would it ameliorate the long-term financial burden of the "travelling legislature" model, according to Hamilton it would also "reflect the unique interests and diverse population of the NWT and encourage the participation of as many citizens as possible." Due to the territory's financial relationship with the federal government and restrictions on resource revenue retention, the only question remaining was how to finance the project.

Construction and Design of the Legislative Assembly Building

To address this crucial issue, the Assembly established the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly Building Society – a non-profit association

designed to organize the financing of the project and find a way to encourage public participation in the construction of the building. It was comprised of former Commissioner John Parker, Dene, Inuit, and Métis development corporations, other northern business interests, and former senior members of the territorial public service.

After considering a number of financing options, the Assembly eventually opted for a lease-to-own program, whereby the building would be financed through a conventional mortgage over a period of 20 years. The Assembly also authorized the Building Society to initiate a voluntary public bond issue system, enabling residents of the NWT to participate in and contribute to the project. Under this system, the Building Society provided ownership and financed the design and construction costs, while the Assembly would lease the building for 20 years before taking ownership in November of 2013. The logic underlying such an arrangement was that it would ensure that the people of the NWT would end up owning an asset in the form of a new building, rather than funding the soaring costs of a mobile Assembly with no concrete return.

When the building officially opened in November of 1993, it was, by any measure, an architectural masterpiece. Nestled on the shore of Frame Lake and surrounded by boreal forest, the building's distinctive domes, circular chamber, open concept, and locally-sourced materials give it a modern disposition unlike any other legislature in Canada. Two local architectural firms were hired: Pin/Matthews Architects and Ferguson Simek Clark Architects and Engineers, who collaborated with Matsuzaki Architects Inc. of Vancouver and landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander.

The walls are made, in part, from zinc mined on Cornwallis Island; expansive spaces are illuminated by substantial windows filtering in natural light; and the Caucus Room, Chamber, and hallways are adorned with northern sculptures and paintings. Few aspects of the building's design echo the Victorian-era architecture common to most Canadian legislatures. The departure was a deliberate and conscientious decision by the architects, who intended to showcase the unique and distinct peoples, cultures, and practice of consensus government found in the NWT. The circular shape of the Caucus Room and Chamber, for example, is meant to facilitate consensus-building, collaboration, and working together as a minority-led collective. Additionally, it reflects the way in which Aboriginal groups traditionally make decisions in their own communities.

Twentieth Anniversary Celebration

Twenty years after the building was erected, the final payment on the mortgage was slated to be made in September of 2013, as the anniversary of the official opening approached in November. The Office of the Clerk, under the direction of Speaker Jackie Jacobson, was tasked with organizing the 20th anniversary celebration.

Since the building is not only a place of work for legislators, but also a gathering place for the public, the planning committee adopted a number of key guiding principles in its preparations. First, the celebration ought to be enjoyed by the people of the NWT. Second, it ought to celebrate the historical evolution of the Legislative Assembly, as well as the building itself. Third, it ought to offer an opportunity for the public to hear stories from former leaders in a way that would bring to life the moments and personalities that have shaped contemporary politics in the NWT. The end result would be a rare and powerful occasion reuniting northern political figureheads and inviting members of the public to take part in a celebration of the territory's political heritage.

On the evening of November 1, 2013, the Great Hall filled to capacity. Current and former Commissioners, Premiers, Speakers, Members, and Clerks arrived, along with an impressive turnout from the public. The Yellowknives Dene First Nation Drummers, a drumming group from the nearby community of Dettah, opened the event with a ceremonial drum prayer. After the welcoming address delivered by Speaker Jacobson, it was time to unveil the portraits of all former Premiers and the two most recent Speakers. One by one, former territorial leaders came forward to unveil their portraits. Once the public had an opportunity to explore the Caucus Room, Chamber floor, contents of a time capsule, video of congratulatory messages sent from other Canadian legislatures, and historical photo displays of the NWT's political evolution, attendees gathered in the public gallery to listen to the Premiers' panel discussion. The panel comprised all former Premiers but one who was unable to attend, beginning with Government Leader George Braden (1980 to 1984), and moving in chronological order through to Floyd Roland, the Premier from 2007 to 2011.

The Premiers' panel discussion brought to life the territory's political history through story-telling, first-hand accounts, and general commentary unencumbered by the stresses of public scrutiny and Ministerial responsibility. Onlookers became privy to personal insights, stories from First Ministers' Conferences (FMC) and reflections on the goals and ambitions held by those holding the highest political office in the territory.



Photo by Tessa Macintosh

The Honourable Jackie Jacobson, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, cuts a cake in the design of the legislative building with the help of his daughter Mikayla.

Both rooms contain designated areas for interpreters, who translate any of the 11 official languages that may be spoken at any given time when the House is in session. Some features, such as the location of the Speaker's Chair at the head of the Chamber and the adherence to formal house procedure, are more reflective of the Westminster parliamentary system used throughout the rest of the country (with the exception of Nunavut). The building itself embodies the principles of a democratic parliament rooted in indigenous northern traditions, from the design and materials used, to the cultures represented and government system practiced within. At last, the NWT had acquired a permanent home grounded in the political heritage of the territory, and one that would house the Assembly for years to come.

Referring to the 1982 delegation travelling to Ottawa during the repatriation of the Constitution, Richard Nerysoo asserted, “[m]ost people think that the constitutional changes of Section 25 and 35 somehow came from a lot of other people, but this is the group of people that led that conversation and assured Canadians that the interests of First Nations and Aboriginal people, Métis and Inuit, were going to be protected.” Dennis Patterson recalled the moment when territorial Government Leaders were invited to join the FMCs in Ottawa. He said, “[w]e became equals at the table. We were brought into the First Ministers’ Conferences...the NWT came of age and became an equal as a very important strategic part of Canada during my term.” Joe Handley held a different perspective on the same subject; he commented that “they quickly make it clear to you that you’re a little fish in a big pond.” Nellie Cournoyea offered candid advice for those aspiring to political office: “[i]f you know something’s got to be done and you’re not going to fight for it, stay home.”

Other former Premiers commented on their particular style or approach to governance and the nature of consensus politics more broadly. Jim Antoine noted, “today we have to keep doing that kind of approach...we had a government-to-government-to-government approach – Aboriginal government, federal government, and territorial government approach on how to do devolution,” and Stephen Kakfwi said the most important aspect of consensus

government is that “it operates in the way that the Inuvialuit, the Dene, and the Métis accept so easily.” By the end of the discussion audience members had a colourful and dynamic image of the NWT’s political development, woven through time by former leaders spanning 30 years of history.

Following this informative and engaging exchange, Renalita Arluk of Fort Smith gave a passionate theatrical rendition of significant moments in the territory’s history and Leela Gilday, Juno-award winning singer and songwriter from Yellowknife, performed. A group of Inuvialuit Drummers from Tuktoyaktuk, the Speaker’s hometown, closed the evening with a rousing performance.

Conclusion

The people of the Northwest Territories have much to celebrate politically. The government has transformed from a colonial dependency to a large, sophisticated body legislated by 19 elected members from all regions of the territory. The Executive Council has expansive control over the affairs of the NWT. The Assembly reflects the population it represents and is guided by the traditions of the people living there. The territory has acquired much of the same jurisdictional powers as the provinces, and the process of devolution continues to this day. The Legislative Assembly building now stands as a permanent reminder of these advancements and the individuals who fought for them.



Photo by Tessa Macintosh

The Premiers’ panel discussion gathered almost all former premiers of the territory (from left to right): George Braden, Richard Nerysoo, Nick Sibbeston, Dennis Patterson, Deputy Clerk Doug Schauerte, Nellie Cournoyea, Jim Antoine, Stephen Kakfwi, Joe Handley, and Floyd Roland. Former Premier Don Morin was unable to attend.