

Women Achieve Parity in NWT Legislative Assembly Without Guaranteed Seats

In just one general election the Northwest Territories went from having the least representation by women in its Assembly to the most in the country. Moreover, women MLAs were elected to fill four of six cabinet positions and to be the premier. In this article, the author suggests these dramatic changes are a response, in part, to a significant discussion and debate members of the previous legislative assembly undertook to improve women's participation and representation in the territory. She reviews the proposal for temporary special measures as a way to build representation, outlines other recommendations MLAs made to encourage more women to participate in territorial politics, and explains why this environment ultimately led many more women to put their names on the ballot in 2019.

Julie Green, MLA

When the revolution finally began, it was swift and decisive. On October 1, the Northwest Territories moved from having the least representation by women (11 per cent) to the most (47 per cent) in a Canadian legislature. The 19 Members of the 19th Assembly then elected a woman premier (the only one in Canada at the moment) and four women to Cabinet (out of six Members). The territorial legislature has no parties. Each candidate runs as an independent. Once elected, Members self-nominate for Executive Council positions; they are then elected by secret ballot by all Members.

The women elected are diverse. Six of the nine are Indigenous; two have small children and two have teenagers; one was chief of her First Nation; one is an engineer, another is a lawyer; one is a nurse, another is a self-government negotiator; two come from the non-profit sector, and two were part of the territorial civil service. The women MLAs come from constituencies across the Northwest Territories from Inuvik above the Arctic Circle, to Fort Smith on the Alberta border.

"Women in power have made a difference in the North and in our communities."

Julia Cockney, Tuktoyaktuk NWT

This change, from being behind to being ahead in women's representation at the territorial government level, was not a fluke but the result of a consistent effort of Members of the 18th Assembly to improve the representation of women.

One of the priorities of the 18th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories was "supporting initiatives designed to increase the number of women running for elected office." The previous Speaker of the Legislative Assembly took up this challenge, along with our MLA colleagues. On International Women's Day 2018, Jackson Lafferty shared his vision: "We, as elected leaders of this territory, have the ability to act as role models and also supporters to change the status quo. We must encourage female participation in all aspects of work and life, but especially within our own legislature."

That day, Members unanimously adopted a motion to give that aspiration meaning by establishing a goal of increasing the representation of women in the Legislative Assembly to 20 per cent by 2023 (four Members) and 30 per cent (six Members) by 2027. The rationale for the targets is provided by the United Nations which determined that 30 per cent is the threshold at which elected women can bring about lasting and significant policy changes.

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The women of the 19th Assembly of the NWT are; Back row: Premier Caroline Cochrane (Range Lake), Caitlin Cleveland (Kam Lake), Paulie Chinna (Sahtu), Caroline Wawzonek (YK South). Front row: Katrina Nokleby (Great Slave), Frieda Martselos (Thebacha), Lesa Semmler (Inuvik Twin Lakes), Diane Thom (Inuvik Boot Lake) and Julie Green (YK Centre).

Our challenge was to figure out how to meet these targets. The Speaker had attended the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference in 2017 and took note of how the South Pacific island nation of Samoa, in partnership with the United Nations Development Program, addressed this issue by introducing guaranteed seats for women in a cultural context that was similar to our own.

The Speaker tabled a discussion paper during the Spring 2018 sitting of the Legislative Assembly “in the hopes that it will initiate a public discussion about the role of women in public office in the Northwest Territories, particularly leading up to the next general election.”

The paper describes how temporary special measures would work in the Northwest Territories. Members of the Legislative Assembly would agree to allocate a set number of seats for women, using the goals already agreed on – four in 2023 and six in 2027. During these elections, all the work that goes into getting women to become candidates and then campaigning for support would continue in the same way that it does now. After the ballots were counted, if the number of women elected didn’t meet our goal, a temporary seat would be created. The woman candidate who finished best across the territory (based on the percentage of votes earned) but who *didn’t* get elected would be appointed to a seat for the duration of the Assembly. (Note: the additional seat(s) would be in addition to the permanent 19 seats in the Assembly.)

Temporary special measures are exactly what they say they are. They are an immediate, extraordinary and short-term way to shake off the stubborn underrepresentation of women in our legislature. The experience in Samoa and elsewhere is that these measures are, by their nature, self-fulfilling. The strongest determinant of the number of women who are elected to political office is the numbers who actually run. By encouraging more women to enter political life, these measures quickly become unnecessary. This is why they are called “temporary.” The discussion paper proposed that the legislation to create temporary special measures in the NWT would automatically sunset after two general elections.

The Assembly created a special committee of MLAs in October 2018 with me as chair to identify and recommend ways to move us toward our goal, including testing temporary special measures with the public as a possible solution. The committee travelled to 10 communities and met with women who held leadership positions in the community, Indigenous governments as well as former MLAs and those who were curious about our work.

The interim report tabled in March 2019 made seven recommendations to remove the barriers we heard about most often. We recommended child care be an allowable election expense as well as an eligible expense from our constituency work allowance. We asked the Legislative Assembly to make our workplace more family friendly by allowing for a four-month parental leave, by installing infant change tables and creating a family room. We also requested funding to ramp up campaign schools and increase education about the work of MLAs. Members endorsed all the recommendations and most have now been implemented.

The special committee’s final report, tabled in June 2019 discussed legislative changes, including whether to move forward with a plebiscite on temporary special measures. The idea wasn’t well received by most of the women who appeared before the committee even though they might have benefitted from guaranteed seats. We heard that this approach represented tokenism and ensured that appointed women would be treated as second best by the public and colleagues alike. Nor were committee Members themselves fully in support of temporary special measures to address women’s underrepresentation. Our compromise position was

to recommend that if women’s representation didn’t change in the 2019 election, we would revisit the issue.

The discussion of temporary special measures was not a waste of time. Some of the women we met with decided to become candidates and were elected. Others helped with campaigns and otherwise increased their knowledge of politics. I believe there is a direct connection between the committee’s work and the record number of women who decided to run: 22 in 2019 versus 10 in 2015. Women on the ballot equal women in the House.

Another reason so many women ran and succeeded relates to a number of training and education efforts. The Status of Women Council of the NWT has been offering campaign schools for women for years. In 2015 Caroline Cochrane (now Premier) and I attended the Yellowknife school. Once elected, we taught at campaign schools in Hay River, Fort Simpson, Inuvik and Yellowknife. I hosted a young women’s leadership development workshop called Daughters of the Vote in February 2017, building on the Equal Voice initiative that year. I received a small grant to offer a series of election-readiness workshops called Women on the Ballot last winter. Many volunteers have spent hours talking to women about issues ranging from developing confidence and managing family responsibilities while away from home, to the substantive issues of governance, in addition to many private mentoring efforts.

All of these initiatives have paid off with the largest number of women ever elected to the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly in October. We have established a new threshold of participation to equal and expand in coming elections. We have demonstrated that offering women skill development in politics and campaigning, and accommodating them in the House as caregivers, makes public service a viable career choice. We have recommended an election rebate policy to offset the costs of running for office. We have removed most of the barriers women said prevented them from running for office. I am confident that having more women in the House will encourage more women to run based on the diversity of role models. I believe that Members will demonstrate their competence, initiative and tenacity so that any remaining doubts that women belong in the House are put to rest. Together we will bring real and lasting change to represent all Northerners.