



Interview

Sam Johnston

On July 15, 1985, Sam Johnston was elected Speaker of the Yukon Legislative Assembly. The first native Canadian to occupy a Speaker's Chair in Canada, he was interviewed for the Canadian Parliamentary Review in August, 1986, at the Canadian Regional Conference of CPA in Toronto.

Tell us a bit about your background before going into politics.

I worked at all kinds of things, in lumber mills, survey parties and as a guide for big game outfitters. During the winter months I worked the trap lines. I was always able to find a job. During the 1970s and early 1980s I served as Chief of the Teslin Indian Band. The Chief is elected every two years. It used to be more of a ceremonial office but the position took on more administrative aspects as we organized new programs and took over existing ones administered by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. I was the first of our Band Chiefs to have administrative responsibilities.

I remember organizing a walkathon to raise money for the Band. We raised about \$600 and that was the start of our fund. The Chief had to account for every cent but I had no training in administration. The public health nurse helped me to keep the books. I also took some training as Band manager. That was the only way to earn money since the Chief was not paid but the manager was. As we took over more responsibility from the federal government the office of Chief became a full-time one.



How were the Tlingits traditionally governed?

There are two main clans, the Wolf and the Crow, and out of these two main clans are subclans which have different names. In my particular little clan, called the Ishkeetan, everything falls on the mother's side and we are a subclan of the Crow clan. In the small village of Teslin there are five different clans among our people and, out of those clans, there are five different leaders plus the Chief. Even though I am not the Chief anymore I am still the leader of my clan. We are the leaders of our own people and, therefore, we are the key spokesmen for our clans. Any time there are issues that come up, such as a *potlatch* where my people need to have their voice heard then it is up to me to stand up and speak. If there is good to be said you say it, if you feel you are affected by the other clans, if there is something they have done that has affected your clan, then you speak to that too.

During potlatches, which are not done now as formally as before, you have opportunities for a lot of speeches, especially a year after the burial when we put up the gravemarker. Many of those speeches would be about how pleased everyone

is that a loved one has finally been put to rest properly. At this time, too, if there was something that was bothering your clan about anything another clan had done or not done, that is when something could be said. For example, it might be about a violation of someone else's hunting or fishing area which used to be quite clearly understood. There is not the same respect for those areas today. In the past everything was based on survival and we were taught respect for the land and animals. We would never take any more than we needed because it is wrong to be wasteful. We followed the salmon, we followed where the birds migrate. We would go to the mountains for our winter's meat. All that has changed now and you do not see too many of the native people solely living off the land anymore.

said jokingly that he thought I should be the next MLA. In fact, because of my experience as Chief, I was approached by all three parties to see if I was interested in running.

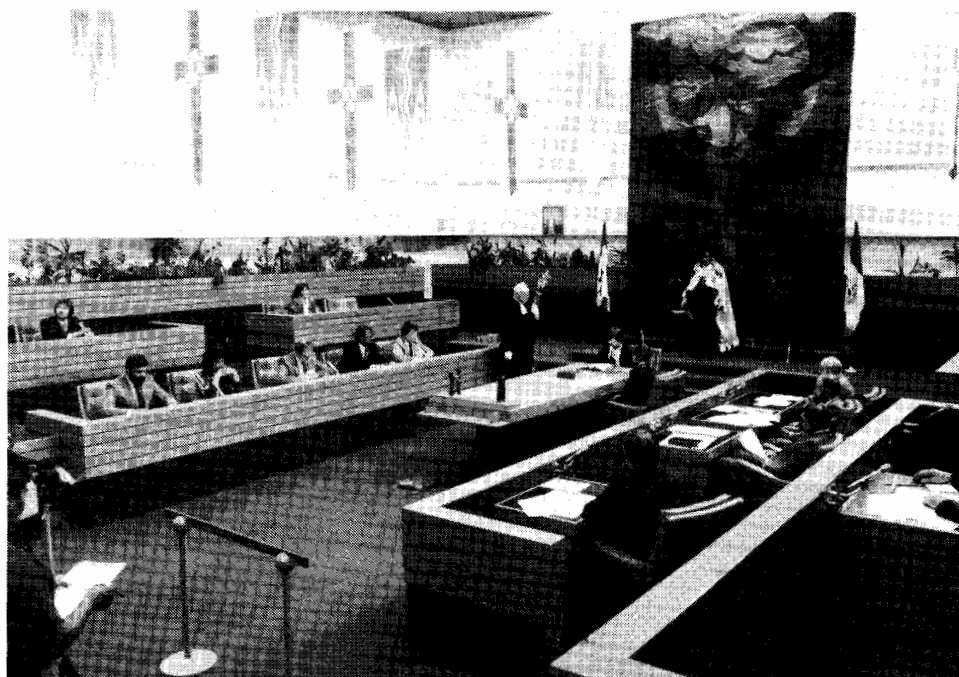
Why did you go into politics?

With the coming of the land claims, I felt it was time that the native people started getting into the government and what better place to start. My thought was that I would be able to start opening doors for those who follow me. They will be thinking "If Sam can do it, why can't I?" There are a lot of decisions made in this House that affect the Indian people, especially when it comes to renewable resources. I felt it was time for the Indian people to start getting into the government where we can participate in decision-

have to be with one of the other parties. I opted for the New Democratic Party and won the election by about sixty-five votes.

Tell us a bit more about your constituency?

It is one of the larger ridings in the Yukon. Teslin, in the centre, is about eight hours by road from Ross River and about three hours from Liard. There are about 600 voters in the riding and I probably know most of them personally. It is important to represent all three communities and I try to visit them once a month. We do not have any constituency offices so I stay with friends for four or five days and make sure that I contact the community clubs, band chiefs, the RCMP and any individuals who might want to see me.



A sitting of the Yukon Legislative Assembly.

How did you get into politics?

When I retired as Band Chief in 1982 I had no thought of getting into the legislature. I spent some time working the trap lines and was earning good money. The market for long haired lynx and wolverine is very good and a person can earn \$30,000 or more for a few months work. A good trapper has to really work the lines and study the game. He must be a self-made game biologist.

Before the 1985 election the person who held the seat for Campbell in the Assembly moved to Watson Lake. He

making rather than being on the outside looking in.

Was there any particular issue that made you choose the New Democratic Party?

It was not so much an issue as a question of geography. You see there are three main areas in the constituency – Teslin, Ross River and Upper Laird. The Conservatives nominated somebody from Ross River over a person from Teslin. This meant that if Teslin was to have a chance to be represented in the Legislature it would

Were you surprised to be chosen Speaker of the Assembly after the election?

I sure was. The election results were very close with eight NDP, six Conservatives and two Liberals. After the ministers had been appointed there were only three government backbenchers: Norma Kassi, Art Webster and myself. When the Government Leader asked me to be Speaker I declined but he asked me to think it over. That weekend the newspaper ran a picture of the Speaker's chair with a story about who

was going to fill it. I decided to accept although I had never laid eyes on the Assembly in my life. I wished I had at least visited the House so that I would have had some idea of what I was getting into.

Do your constituents ever complain about their member being the Speaker?

At the start I think there was a bit of a misunderstanding. My constituents thought that they had elected a member and were now losing him with my election as Speaker. After a while I think that attitude changed a bit and I think as Speaker I may have even better access to ministers than I would have had otherwise. Also, in our House, the rules do allow me to attend and speak in the Committee of the Whole. Although the Speaker should never make partisan speeches it is possible, in that situation, to speak on behalf of my electoral district. I always try to be very careful and not to say anything unless it is absolutely necessary.

What did you find to be the greatest difficulties as a result of your lack of experience in the House and in the Chair?

It is very difficult sitting in that big chair with the galleries full and all members looking at you. I had to get used to certain formalities like calling members by their constituency. As far as procedure was concerned I had to rely on the Clerk who prepared an outline for me to follow each day. One of the big problems for me is Question Period. I find that I may easily miss something and it can be embarrassing when a member raises a point of order about a question or answer. I guess it takes time until you can pick up on all the fine points.

What is your reaction to unparliamentary language?

It is the job of the Speaker to ensure that the language used does not get out of control. I am perhaps a bit more sensitive to the language used in the

House. Through my past experience as Chief of the Teslin Band I found that you can never deal with any situation in anger. You should come prepared to talk and you cannot accomplish anything by yelling or insulting anyone. Respect and good intentions are needed.

Have you tried to make the office reflect your status as the first native Speaker?

One of the first things I did was order a new Speaker's robe. It was made of a light blue material donated by a local craft store. It has a raven on the back. On the front is a howling wolf on one side and a flying raven on the other. I wear this robe on Mondays and use the traditional black one the rest of the week. When I leave the Speakership I intend to leave the robe behind and hope it will be used by future Speakers.

I also devised a new prayer for the Assembly which I think is more appropriate for persons coming from different religious denominations. It goes like this:

"O Great Spirit, Creator and Leader of all People, we are thankful to be gathered here today.

O Great Spirit, I ask you to touch and bless each and everyone in this House.

Grant that we the elected members will make only strong, fair and sound decisions On behalf of the people we represent throughout the Yukon".

Did you consult with the House Leaders?

No, I did not approach it that way. When I was first going into the House, realizing that I would be the first native Speaker, I thought that I should bring in something that was different, more on the native side, but would cover everybody. I showed it to different people and it was not changed much from what I had first written. I wanted something that was not only Christian or anything else, I wanted something

that would speak for everybody. I think some members were a bit shocked at first because it was different from what they had been used to. I contacted a few members on each side after I first used it and asked their reaction and was told there was nothing wrong with it. So I have continued to use it.

You were elected President of the Yukon Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association shortly after being elected as a Member of the Assembly. What do you feel about the value of the CPA? Have you learned anything that helps you as a Member or as a Speaker?

It has been very interesting to meet Speakers from other legislatures and jurisdictions. I am glad to be part of it because we are all doing much the same job and participating in the sessions and conferences has been very educational. Although some of the legislatures are much larger than ours I find many of the subjects we talk about to be similar such as Question Period, whether Speakers should attend caucus meetings and, if so, under what conditions and how to handle unparliamentary language.

Is a political career detrimental to family life?

Every politician must have an understanding spouse. When you make commitments to the people it takes you away from home. Without a spouse who understands, it could be very difficult.

I was a single parent for five years so my children were used to the idea that I had to be away. However, because of my involvement in politics they are much more knowledgeable about public life than I was at their age.

Outside of politics I am leader of the Teslin Tlingit Dancers. We perform at different functions and have travelled to Saint John, New Brunswick, for the Canada Games and to Vancouver for Expo 86. There are twenty-one dancers in the group ranging from my eighty-eight year old father to my two year old daughter. Such activities keep our culture alive and our family together.