

Services for Northern Members: the Case of Nunatsiaq

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The number of members in the House of Commons has increased steadily since Confederation but there are still several huge, sparsely populated federal constituencies in Ontario, Quebec, and the four western provinces, as well as in the north. These constituencies present special problems for both residents and representatives. This article looks at the situation in Canada's largest constituency and makes a number of suggestions to meet the special requirements of other isolated electoral districts both federal and provincial.

As legislative office becomes an increasingly onerous full-time-job, recognition has also grown of the needs of legislators with respect to the provision of professional staff, facilities, and support services. In recent decades great strides have

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been made in members' services at the federal level, though these have just barely kept pace with the burgeoning demands on parliamentarians. The average Member of Parliament can expect this trend to continue.

The term "average" implies that there is a significant divergence in the burdens carried by individual Members of Parliament. This is so simply because of the wide differences in the characteristics of federal electoral districts. The nature of Canada is such that it is much more difficult to represent some areas in Ottawa than others. For some electors, their Member's office is within walking distance. For others, such as residents of the high Arctic, it is practically inaccessible. In these cases special cost allowances for members are justified if the principle of equivalent services to all Canadians is to be upheld.

Nunatsiaq Riding Profile

Prior to 1905 the Northwest Territories was represented in Parlia-



If you fly in the NWT, be prepared for anything!

ment simply as an appendage of the territorial districts comprising most of what is now Alberta, Saskatchewan and northern Manitoba. From 1905 to 1947 it had no parliamentary representation at all! Between 1947 and 1962 it was again represented, but only as part of the electoral districts of Yukon Mackenzie and Mackenzie River. After 1962 the Northwest Territories formed a single riding until 1976 when it was divided, for federal electoral purposes, into the constituencies of Western Arctic and Nunatsiak.

Nunatsiak covers roughly all of the territories north of the tree line. This vast east... Arctic expanse also corresponds roughly to the aboriginal territory of "Nunavut" which is the subject of comprehensive land claims negotiations between the Federal Government and the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. Nunatsiak is by far the largest electoral district in Canada, geographically speaking. It covers an area of 2,232,133 square kilometers. This is almost twice the size of the next largest district, Western Arctic, over four times the size of the Yukon Territory, and nearly nine times as large as the largest northern British Columbia riding, Skeena.

But Nunatsiak is also the smallest federal district in terms of population: 14,786 according to the 1976 census. Nunatsiak accounts for 22% of the Canadian land surface; .06% of the Canadian population. Its density is only one person for every 150 square kilometers. This contrasts rather graphically with the constituency which is smallest in area, the Montreal riding of Laurier: 3.2 square kilometers with a population of 76,190. Moreover, Nunatsiak's tiny population is scattered among far-flung settlements with great distances in between and even greater distances between these centres and Ottawa.

Nunatsiak is the only constituency in which the majority of citizens have a mother tongue other than one of Canada's two official languages. The language of the majority in Nunatsiak is Inuktitut. Again according to the most recent census data available 75% of the population falls into this "others" category. Only 20% of Nunatsiak residents have English as their first language, and only 1.5% French. With more than half the population under the age of 18, Nunatsiak reflects the problems of an Inuit culture in transition.

Nunatsiak is not only physically distant and ethnically "other", it is also the only Canadian constituency without any roads or rail lines. All travel must be by air, although there is no reliable regularly-scheduled air service within the riding. One company, Nordair, has a monopoly over the few commercial air links with the rest of Canada. Travelling to and within Nunatsiak is expensive, time-consuming, and requires generous quantities of ingenuity and luck. In short, serving the needs of the people of Nunatsiak has always been a tremendous challenge for the federal elected Member.

The Existing Allowance Structure

Despite the uniqueness of constituencies such as Nunatsiak there is no federal statutory allowance or reimbursement which applies to a member from a single area. However, a telephone-radio link with Nunatsiak has recently been installed in the Member's parliamentary office. This service is a welcome recognition of a special problem as is the recommendation of the Standing Committee on Management and Members' Services that Nunatsiak be provided with a Zenith telephone service to the Ottawa office. The members for Nunatsiak and Western Arctic also receive an enriched expense allowance — \$19,500 in July 1981 as compared to the normal \$14,700. Otherwise their indemnity, travel allowances, and office budget are the same as for any other Member.

Comparisons with other electoral districts are few but worth noting. In Saskatchewan the members for Athabasca and Cumberland receive annual indemnities of \$12,669 compared to the norm of \$10,908. These members, however, receive a slightly lower expense allowance (\$9,516 compared to \$9,729). In the Yukon MLAs from outside Whitehorse receive an expense allowance of \$9,250, members from Whitehorse \$7,250. With respect to travel, the Saskatchewan MLAs for Athabasca and Cumberland are also entitled to two trips per year to each community within their constituency. In the Northwest Territories members of the Territorial Assembly receive a travel allowance sufficient to reimburse them for expenses incurred in making two visits per year to each settlement in their electoral district in addition to five constituency — capital round trips per year. In the Yukon 12 such round trips are allocated per year with additional reimbursements for travel expenses during legislative sessions and for committee meetings. Special arrangements do not exist for office support services, although legislators in the Northwest Territories assembly receive an allotment of \$75 per month for an interpreter.

Outside of Canada even fewer comparisons are possible. In Australia a charter fly/drive allowance is provided for federal parliamentarians based on constituency size: \$9,000 (1980) per annum for those 100,000 square kilometers and over (a dividing line less than one-twentieth the area of Nunatsiak) ranging down to only \$3,000 per annum for those 10,000 to 30,000 square kilometers. Senators for the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia, receive a similar allowance of \$9,000 and \$6,000 respectively. Other Senators, such as from New South Wales, receive only \$3,000 per annum. With regard to support facilities, the members of the House of Representatives for Kalgoorlie and the Northern Territory are provided with two constituency (electorate) offices and two secretaries to staff both of these offices.

Bridging the Services Gap

At present federal members who represent ridings like Nunatsiak are at a considerable disadvantage in reaching their constituents on even an occasional basis when compared to more urban legislators. Although they are allowed up to fifty-two trips per year between Ottawa and their constituencies the main air routes leave a good deal to be desired. A bigger problem is travel within the riding, something which is absolutely essential yet difficult at the best of times. For example, members may be forced to use some of their "points" for special trips across Canada (10 of the 52 trips may be so designated) for the purpose of normal local constituency business. The frequent unavailability of regularly-scheduled service may mean scrambling to obtain space on aircraft chartered by government departments or native organizations.

The absence of road and rail links in Nunatsiak means that the rail pass and the reimbursement for auto mileage within the constituency is meaningless. In other large ridings train and auto allowances may be of little assistance to Members in performing their constituency duties or attending local functions.

As of April 1, 1982 there will be a supplementary allowance for air or water travel expenses of Members in rural or urban-rural ridings. However, those cases in which conventional transportation facilities are almost completely lacking, merit further attention. Perhaps some Members should receive, in lieu of the standard auto mileage reimbursement, and in addition to their fifty-two trips, a travel allowance sufficient to allow them to visit (by air taxi or scheduled service, if available) each community in the constituency at

least twice per calendar year. This would be a similar principle to that already used for Members of the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly and for the two northernmost Members of the Saskatchewan Legislature.

Staffing Problems

The global office and staff budget of large ridings is the same as for every other constituency. Again it is a case of equality in principle resulting in inequity in practice. At the constituency level members usually maintain an office, staffed by one person, in the largest community. Obviously this office cannot serve the entire region on a face-to-face basis. For this the members need personal representatives to act as liaisons for the outlying communities and settlements. The far corners of huge constituencies cannot be served adequately from one central location. Yet the alternative is an expensive proposition which cannot be managed satisfactorily within the existing constituency budget. The present budget for staff also fails to make allowances for the extremely high living costs in the North. Thus the situation for constituency employees of northern members does not compare favourably with that of federal public servants who have higher salaries and special benefits.

The problem for local staff who want to get around the constituency also applies to Ottawa staff brought to the riding under new provisions of the basic travel allowance whereby nine of a member's allotted total of fifty-two "points" may be converted into trips between the constituency and Ottawa for the member's spouse and/or designated alternate or staff. For obvious logistic and financial reasons such persons are unlikely to travel beyond the main population centres in order to acquaint themselves with the problems and needs of the constituency as a whole.

The allocation of up to nine points for staff travel within the overall travel allowance structure is a substantial amelioration, but fails to meet important concerns. One suggestion would be for members from large areas to be provided with a supplementary constituency operations allowance permitting them to hire other local assistants as required. The member's Ottawa staff would also be able to utilize the allotted nine points so as to permit them to visit

each community in the riding. Such an internal round trip would be counted as one point.

The Need for Flexibility

Nunatsiaq is probably the best example of a riding with a unique situation not covered by present rules and guidelines relating to members services. Although more and more Inuit now understand English and have access to southern media, the Inuit language and culture still predominate. This fact is crucial if the integrity of Inuit society is to be maintained for future generations. But it also places a great burden on the Member of Parliament and his staff. The member for Nunatsiaq is in some sense an ambassador for an Inuit civilization which often feels justifiably threatened by the growing pressures impinging upon it from the outside.

Members need to communicate effectively with their constituents in their own language but for those from ridings with a high concentration of native voters it is difficult to retain bilingual staff if no allowance for these skills is made within the regular staff budget. For much of the office correspondence, household mailings, and community radio and television programming, translation is essential. In the absence of Ottawa-based bilingual personnel the Member must attempt to obtain translation services as best he can on a contract, part-time or occasional basis. And he must attempt to cover these very considerable extra costs with funds from the standard global budget.

Perhaps members who represent ridings with a high percentage of native people should be provided with a special translation allowance permitting them to hire bilingual staff in their Ottawa offices as needed, or, alternatively, reimbursement for their actual translation costs relating to constituency business. Such proposals have in the past been rejected due to cost. However, to the extent that translation is essential in ridings with large native populations, these costs should be eligible under an improved reimbursement formula. Indeed the report of the McIsaac-Balcer Commission on members' salaries called for an expanded and more flexible system of accountable expense allowances.