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*TUNDRA TURMOIL / Life on the Northwest Territories political scene, once viewed as the most harmonious in the country, has gradually turned into a long-playing soap opera*

# Northern legislature turns frosty

BY MARO CERRITTO  
The Globe and Mail

**O**NCE renowned for its harmony, the Northwest Territories legislature is increasingly seen as a soap opera in which the clash of political egos and racial politics threatens one of the Commonwealth's unique parliamentary models.

When the 24 government members parade into the legislature each day, passing the spiral mace made from a narwhal tusk and the beaver and seal pelt on the walls, they continue an unorthodox tradition of governing without parties. North-

crans have chosen instead to rule by consensus, following the example set by native elders.

But this two-decade-old system, praised worldwide for its civility, now is viewed by northerners as in jeopardy. The reason is the conduct of the legislators, who sit in the chamber around a polar-bear rug that peers out at the public viewing gallery.

In the past few months, four members of the eight-member cabinet have resigned, sometimes over what seemed trivialities that backbenchers trumped up into serious breaches of ethics. There has been a price for making those heads roll. The

once cosy atmosphere of co-operation has turned frosty.

Some northeners say a day in the NWT legislature now makes Parliament's daily Question Period look like play school. Amid the cancells, red faces and politicking that characterized the last sitting, the adjectives nasty, mean and petty were common.

As a result, for the first time in recent memory there is talk across the 3.4-million-square-kilometre territory of scrapping consensus government and introducing old-fashioned party politics in the hope of injecting some sanity and direction into the government.

"They say we don't have party politics up here, but I beg to differ," said Bryan Pearson, a former member of the legislature and now an outspoken critic of the goings-on in Yellowknife, the territory's capital. "We now have 24 parties, really — 24 individuals who are out to grab whatever they can for themselves. We don't have an effective form of government any more in the territory."

Brian Lewis, member for Yellowknife, has been particularly critical of what has happened in the past few months.

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# Icy relations in Northern legislature

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He believes it is only a matter of time before party politics infiltrates the North, mostly because legislators are indulging in racial and regional rivalries that he says have always existed in the capital but below the surface. "People are beginning to exploit the weaknesses of the system," he said.

He and other legislators say the lack of party discipline in consensus government and the fact that requests by individual members to extend Question Period are rarely denied have made it commonplace to badger cabinet ministers into resignation over trivial matters.

They note that the members doing the badgering, or their allies, can later be elected to fill the vacancy. Such strategems don't carry the same risk as in the South, because election dates are set in law in the territory and governments can't fall.

"If you decide you want to create an opening in cabinet, you just go after somebody, pounding them day after day until they've had enough," Mr. Lewis said. "Once you sense that people are after your blood day after day, you just capitulate."

This happened, he said, to former government leader Dennis Patterson, who resigned the health portfolio before Christmas after he passed a note to another member asking for support for funding a museum in his riding.

Many people thought the note a picaresque matter. Mr. Lewis called it a small "technical mistake." But af-

ter days of rigorous questioning, Mr. Patterson decided he and his family had had enough. He resigned, costing cabinet one of its most experienced ministers.

In another case of backbenchers' wrath, Renewable Resources Minister Titus Allookoo was the subject of an expensive conflict-of-interest investigation because he was living with Betty Harnum, the territory's language commissioner. The investigation found no conflict and Mr. Allookoo kept his post.

Outside observers accused the two native legislators, who spearheaded the lobby for the investigation, of simply being upset because a non-native was hired for a government position.

"It has nothing to do with any so-called conflict of interest or question of accountability," the Nunatsiag News wrote in an editorial. "The real reason is that Betty Harnum, a non-native woman, was hired for the job instead of two less-qualified Dene males."

The newspaper, widely read in the North, went on to call the events in the legislature "North America's most depressing soap opera." The editorial was headed, "Enough already."

That sentiment was apparently shared by another cabinet minister, who was the first to resign last

spring. "I went to the hospital about a week ago," John Ningark, a quiet Inuk from an Eastern Arctic riding, told the legislature before resigning. "I have to use sleeping pills in order to sleep and go to work the next day. . . . I find it very, very difficult to be on this side of the table at this particular time."

Nellie Cournoyea, the NWT government's leader, chose not to be interviewed on the subject of the legislature's future. But sources said that Ms. Cournoyea and the 23 other members of the government are keenly aware that the public's patience has worn thin.

There is a growing recognition that people want the legislature to spend more time on serious issues facing the territory, such as its first deficit, cuts in federal transfer payments and the impending creation of Nunavut, the new territory for the Inuit of the Eastern Arctic.

"We've been fooling around with, in the grand scheme of things, some pretty minor issues," Mr. Patterson said in an interview from Yellowknife.

Yet the past few months of bitter political battles may be only an omen of things to come. This is because the delicate balance of power that nurtured the non-party system has been upset by the decision this year to create Nunavut.

In 1999, when the Inuit get their

own territorial government and leave Yellowknife's legislature, non-natives will for the first time represent a slight majority of the NWT's remaining population, raising thorny questions about how seats will be divided.

Currently, there is an unwritten quota system to decide who gets into the cabinet. Four ministers must come from the Eastern Arctic and four from the West. Some Dene and Métis leaders have recently lobbied for all the cabinet posts from the West to be filled by natives, something that does not sit well with whites, who are the majority in Yellowknife, the hub of the territory's economy.

The tensions have been smoothed over in the past by the presence of the Inuit, who tend to be less militant about exercising their rights and can be a moderating influence on the Dene, Métis and non-natives.

But Mr. Patterson, who is from Iqaluit in the Eastern Arctic and was territorial leader from 1987 to 1991, worries that racial and regional rivalries may flare once Nunavut is formed and a new power-sharing agreement has to be worked out in the western half of the NWT.

"There is certainly a great deal of attention paid to a person's ethnic origin in the West," Mr. Patterson said. "I think there are a lot of people in the West who are worried about that. The Inuit have always had a sort of moderating influence on the legislature.

"I could see the confrontations increasing without that moderating influence around."

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