

Submission to NWT Electoral Boundaries Commission

January 2013

Re: Multi-Member Constituencies

Introduction

Who is Alternatives North?

Alternatives North is a social justice coalition that has operated in the Northwest Territories for nearly 20 years. Affiliated groups include environmental, church, labour, anti-poverty, and women's organisation, as well as small business people and individuals. Membership in Alternatives North is open to anyone committed to furthering the principles of the organisation.

Why Alternatives North cares about electoral boundaries

Alternatives North believes that a healthy democracy requires a concerned, caring and involved citizenry. Responsible governments should make strong efforts to enhance the democracy they are mandated to uphold.

Although Alternatives North has never submitted before to an Electoral Boundaries Commission, the organisation does have an interest in electoral issues. It has a longstanding affiliation to Fair Vote Canada, and its goal of achieving greater electoral fairness through improved voting procedures. Steadfastly non-partisan, Alternatives North has nevertheless encouraged political awareness and interest throughout the period of its existence, regularly hosting all-candidates meetings in Yellowknife, and frequently administering questionnaires to all candidates for publication in ridings across the territory. In the most recent election, Alternatives North made a special effort to focus the territorial political agenda on the need for a formal and effective anti-poverty strategy to improve the quality of life for all citizens. The advocacy of Alternatives North—and all citizen individuals and organizations—requires that electoral processes provide for effective and responsive representation of society and be subject to continual improvement.

The organisation has become increasingly concerned that interest in the electoral process and the workings of government seem to be declining (not only in the NWT, it must be said, but across the country). The evidence and trends in the NWT seem clear.

Election Year	Total Votes Cast	Percentage Votes Cast
2003	16,107	68.54%
2007	13,025	67.02%
2011	11,865	48%

Urgent remedial action is needed to revitalise our democracy. The Report of this Boundaries Commission offers an opportunity to get started.

Alternatives North has considered the means by which our Territorial government, and the process of selecting it, can be improved. Although there are no doubt a variety of ways that this can be achieved, the Electoral Boundaries Commission process can only go so far. Nevertheless, in the view of Alternatives North, the Commission does have the mandate to recommend a change that will have positive impact.

The Proposal

Any municipality in the Northwest Territories that has more than one member elected from within its boundary would be combined into one community-wide constituency. Specifically the proposal would affect Inuvik with its two seats, Yellowknife with seven and Hay River with two, combining the three communities into three multi-member constituencies with the same number of seats as now (or however many may exist after electoral boundaries review and revision).

Total Number of Members in Assembly

Note that the recommended change could be implemented with the same number of Members but it's not essential; the actual number of seats in these multi-member ridings could be varied as required without the need to adjust boundaries. Therefore, should the Commission recommend changes to the current configuration of seats in the Legislative Assembly, Alternatives North believes that the representation of the multi-member ridings could simply be adjusted. Similarly, should another community achieve a second seat, they would be created as multi-member constituencies, and should an existing multi-member riding lose its extra seat, it would become a single member constituency.

Not a New Idea

The proposed multi-member constituencies in no way break new ground. Examples in other jurisdictions abound. Multi-member electoral districts, in which two or more representatives are elected at large from a single district, are now in use in legislative systems in a large majority of the fifty states in the U.S. Many (if not most) European, South American and Asian countries also utilise the system. In fact, proportional electoral systems depend on multi-member constituencies to operate properly and proportional systems are far and away the most common electoral system in the nations of the world.

Multi-member, election-at-large systems also now work reasonably well at the municipal level in NWT and in many other places around the country and world. The change would be relatively easy to implement legislatively and should enjoy a fair degree of public acceptability. It would not require a great deal of public education to function properly since voters are already familiar with the process in municipal elections.

A different system of voting

The voting system could be the same as is presently used in territorial municipal elections or by some other means seen as equally fair. For example, a system of "preferential" or "instant run-off" voting might offer positive results. That process is described in Appendix A. A variety of voting methodologies are described on Fair Vote Canada's website (www.fairvote.ca). Should Commission members believe that neither the multi-vote, at-large system now used in municipal elections in the NWT, nor a preferential voting system as described in the Appendix are adequate, other options can be examined. Alternatives North believes that a suitable voting system for use in the proposed multi-member constituencies can be found.

Why a multi-member constituency solution?

As confirmed in the 2011 Report of Elections NWT, there is a (growing) problem of declining engagement in the democratic process in the NWT, especially in Yellowknife if voter turnout is the gauge. Solutions should be sought and the NWT Electoral Boundaries Commission should be doing its part, to the extent its mandate permits.

Multi-member constituencies promise fully democratic and fair representation. As mentioned elsewhere in this submission, the structure is very common in electoral systems across the world.

Under it there are no "wasted" votes. In the present system, a voter whose choice is not elected (too often even more than 50% of electors in a riding face this reality) may feel they have no representative in the Assembly - a cancerous situation that threatens the legitimacy of elected government. Increasing the opportunity for electors to have successfully chosen at least one representative sitting in the Assembly by permitting a citizen to vote for two or more candidates from among a longer list increases chances someone with the voter's confidence will be elected. This will have a salutary affect on electors' perception of the Legislative Assembly and

government as a whole.

Multi-member constituencies will also reduce the pressure occasionally felt by some voters that they must vote strategically in the hopes of preventing the success of a candidate they don't want to see elected.

These observations are not intended to reflect negatively on sitting members or any past candidate, they're the inevitable result of the limited choice that comes from ridings peopled by electors with a wide range of preferences seeing too few candidates. In 2011 half of the ridings (nine of 19) had only two candidates.¹ In the three ridings where candidates were acclaimed in 2011 (two of them in multi-seat communities of Yellowknife and Inuvik) voters had no choice in the selection of their Member.

Multi-member Constituencies are appropriate for consensus government

The existing territorial constituency system was developed in the British Parliament with a two-party, adversarial system in mind. It is a colonial relic. The people of the NWT have rejected a party-based political system, why not the electoral system that serves it too?

Democracy should not be seen as simple "majoriticism", as a tyranny of the majority, but rather should be perceived as a desire to achieve governance by consensus. Winner-take-all election battles, wherein voters may feel unrepresented by victorious Members for whom they did not cast a vote, are alienating and to be avoided. It is far better that, as far as possible, citizens be given the chance to support more or many candidates, increasing their chance of having an elected Member they feel represents their interests, and for whom they voted and have respect.

¹*In the 2011 election: three ridings had one candidate (acclamations); nine had two; three had three; three had four and one had five.*

Better representation

Geographic constituencies in urban areas are artificial, especially in the relatively small communities of the Northwest Territories. The interests of citizens in different ridings in a territorial municipality (or probably even region) – as a whole – cannot be seen as significantly different. Of course, this is not to say that there are not often very different views and interests to be found within a riding or region, only that a very similar range is found across ridings. And even more to the point, different ideas or perspectives that do exist are rarely, if ever, concentrated in one area of a community, especially one demarcated by constituency boundaries set only with an eye to equalise the numbers of citizens represented in each. The system simply cannot be seen as anything more than contrived.

In general, in a multi-member solution, Members can better and more effectively represent the people in an interest group with whom they have an affinity, rather than a heterogeneous collection of people who happen to live in a neighbourhood.

Furthermore, if there happens to be an issue with specific geographic or local parameters, concerned citizens would enjoy the likelihood of having all the elected members from the community advocating for it, not just one as the current system is designed to provide.

Finally, there is little risk that any benefits that arise from having single member representation are not lost in a multi-member system because citizens can and will vote for the MLA(s) they feel will best represent them, either on general (ideological) grounds or if they have a personal issue or problem they want the Assembly to address. It is a virtual certainty that all MLAs are now approached by citizens from outside their constituency from time to time, depending on the position they may have taken on an issue.

Other issues and considerations

MLA roots in their community/riding

No community in the NWT is so large or diverse that MLAs elected community-wide would be in danger of being out of touch. In fact, MLAs are now known to their whole community and reflect their whole community in debate and decision-making. It is only because the media identifies an incumbent's riding that citizens even think of them as "attached" to a riding (in the main). One doesn't think of a "Member from X Riding". On the contrary, they are thought of as being from Hay River, or Inuvik, or Yellowknife (or any other community for that matter). Specific riding designations are seen as artificial and forced in the average citizen's mind. The validity of this assessment is sustained by the fact that under existing law, candidates don't have to live in a riding to run to represent it. No greater argument for "community based" representation can be made.

"Selecting" a riding

Presently, potential candidates are wise to "shop" for a riding in which to run. Candidates often avoid running in ridings in which incumbents are standing for re-election, preferring to stand in ridings in which there is no incumbent on the slate. As a result, ridings that have no incumbent often have a large number of candidates while the riding next-door sees an acclamation. Multi-member constituencies erase this problem allowing all candidates to stand against each other in a fair and open competition.

Advantage to Sitting Incumbents

A criticism of the proposal to change to multi-member constituencies may be that it gives significant advantage to incumbent Members. They enjoy name recognition, have a supply of prior campaign materials, have built a reputation, etc., - all factors that are likely to give them a head start in a community-wide campaign. Although true, this is nothing different from the current situation.

Operation and Practices in the Assembly Unaffected

The proposed change is unlikely to negatively affect the effectiveness of decision-making or general functioning in the Assembly. The range of voices in the House should not change with the proposed riding structure. Similarly, there is no reason that the change should impact Cabinet or Premier selection processes. In our consensus system, there is advantage to electing a “team” to represent the community, rather than a number of members representing a corresponding number of ridings. The major services delivered by the GNWT (e.g. schools, health facilities, airports, roads, environmental programs, etc.) are usually services shared equally by the whole community. Since multi-member riding members must work cooperatively on major issues and services; electing them as a team would be reflective of the public will to have them work together, and not merely in their narrow riding interests.

Future of Multi-Member Constituencies

The idea of multi-member constituencies might be transferable to regions. It is not recommended here out of concern that the interests of the various communities in a region may not be sufficiently homogeneous. It seems a truism that the interests of the smallest communities may never be fully represented in the Assembly because of the greater number of voters who reside in the larger communities. The same cannot be said among neighbourhoods in the three affected communities. This argument prevails whether considering multi- or single-member constituencies.

“Balance of Power”

A concern heard frequently in the Assembly is that the larger number of seats concentrated in the largest communities gives a disproportionate weight to the voice of the larger communities. Regardless of the merits of this concern, the proposal to elect Members at large for multi-member communities would have no effect upon this factor or perception.

Complicated and Confusing Ballots

The ballot would not be too large and confusing to electors in the polling booth (even in Yellowknife). The experience with city councilor elections in Yellowknife, which has traditionally had a large number of candidates, shows this concern to be unfounded. Ballots with a dozen and a half names on them are not uncommon. Few complaints or concerns by voters about the method have been recorded.

Communication between MLAs and Citizens

Communication initiated by constituents towards MLAs should not be compromised by the recommended structure. Citizens will go to the individual MLA who the constituent believes is most attuned to their personal interests and ideas. As mentioned, this is often now the case. Alternatively, citizens may approach the MLA who has a reputation as being most effective at solving problems or especially interested in the issue at hand. Although this may skew the representational workload for Members, it is not likely to be much different from the present situation. As well, since the MLA pool is likely to be deep and wide under the proposed system, fair and proper distribution of workload can be expected.

Sharing and Co-operation

MLAs in the three communities might beneficially realise that it is in their mutual interests, and in the interests of their collective constituents, for them to co-operate in providing services. Such co-operation could take a variety of forms: shared constituency assistants with specialised skills or portfolio assignments, shared office space and equipment, community wide polling, etc. Should this co-operation extend into relations in the House, all the better. Of course, come election time, politicians in multi-member constituencies will be competing with each other, as well as with non-incumbents, for voter support.

Cost Savings and More Accessible Government

Cost savings at election time might also be possible. In Yellowknife, most city councilor election campaigns are run for less than \$10,000, mayoralty races for \$25,000. Should multi-member constituencies be created, a reduction in the upper limit on campaign expenses should be implemented. It would be impractical for each candidate to spend at the current limits. The community would be awash in advertising and promotional materials. Of course, lowering the amounts required to run for election would generally be perceived as good for our democracy.

Reduce Acclamations

In a very real sense, acclamations of Members to seats in the Assembly bespeak a weakness in the general health of democracy. Even sitting Members who were acclaimed made public statements to the effect that they regretted that they did not have to "face the people" in a contest of ideas to earn their seat. In 2011 there were three acclamations, two of them in communities that would be affected by the proposed change. In multi-member ridings, acclamations are very unlikely.

Reduce (or Avoid) Gerrymandering

Although gerrymandering has not yet been a large issue in the Northwest Territories, it has been a huge concern in other jurisdictions. The proposed new multi-member constituencies would make the need for, or likelihood of, gerrymandering in ridings in the Northwest Territories very unlikely.

Better Gender Balance could be facilitated

Single member constituencies are a significant impediment to measures that might encourage better gender representation. Opponents to proposals that increase female representation, for example by increasing size of House to have one male and one female representative per riding, have been rejected for political and/or cost reasons. The implementation of multi-member ridings would open the door to having two lists of candidates: one male and one female, with votes cast by both men and women for representatives on both lists. The total number of elected members in such case would be the same as the current (or newly recommended) number of seats available – only half male, half female.

Weledeh – a special case?

The existing riding of Weledeh is unique and somewhat problematic because it combines the communities of Dettah and Ndilo, as well as the substantial outlying community of residences along the Ingraham Trail, with a significant section of the north end of the City of Yellowknife. It is one of the top two or three ridings in the NWT in terms of numbers of electors.

Practically speaking, the citizens of Ndilo and Dettah almost certainly have interests quite different from people in Yellowknife. It might be best for Ndilo and Dettah to be placed in a separate riding (possibly along with eastern Great Slave Lake communities whose interests might more generally align with theirs), while Ingraham Trail residents could continue with representation by Members elected in the new multi-member Yellowknife riding.

Conclusion

There are a variety of means by which participation in our democracy can be enhanced. Given the continuing deterioration in voter participation, it is very important for the Commission to consider and make recommendations to re-energize political participation. The range of potential ideas available to the NWT Electoral Boundaries Commission under its mandate is circumscribed. The creation of multi-member constituencies is one such option. Alternatives North strongly recommends that the Commission report to the Legislative Assembly such a recommendation.

Appendix

Alternative Voting (AV) is a majoritarian voting system, also known as Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), or the "preferential vote". Under an Alternative Voting system, voters rank candidates in order of preference. If the prescribed number of candidates does not win an absolute majority of votes right away, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and their votes redistributed according to second preferences. This process repeats until the prescribed numbers of candidates get a majority of votes. It is not a "proportional" system of voting.