



Parliamentary Book Shelf

With the People Who Live there: The History of the Yukon Legislature 1909-1961, by Linda Johnson, Legislative Assembly of the Yukon, Whitehorse, 2009.

In less than a hundred years since the discovery of gold in 1896 the Yukon evolved from a colony administered by Ottawa, to partial and later fully representative government and finally to a full system of responsible government. It is the only one of Canada's three territories having well developed political parties rather than a consensus style of non party government.

This book originated in a report written in the 1980s by Linda Johnson who taught history at Yukon College. It covered the years 1909 to 1961, the first phase of representative government. With the Yukon celebrating 100 years of elected government in 2009 the Speaker of the Legislature authorized publication of an updated study to mark the occasion.

Each of the eight chapters deals with a distinct era in Yukon history with emphasis on the activities of the elected Council (as the Legislature was first called) during that period. The chapter on the first wholly elected Council in 1909 is one of the most interesting as three groups quickly formed to contest the election. When the votes were counted there were six Liberals, four Conservatives and two Labour members. They tried, unsuccessfully for immediate "home rule" but had to settle for an advisory role to the Commissioner who was appointed by Ottawa. They did manage to establish a

committee system and a role for themselves in financial matters and over appointments.

The remaining chapters cover the work of the Legislature whose history parallels the boom and bust economy of the Territory and the impact of different governments in Ottawa. The Great War and the 1920s were a tough time in Yukon as the economy floundered and there was a significant out migration of people. In 1919 the Council was reduced in size by Ottawa to only three ridings (each with two members). As in the rest of Canada one of the main topics of debate in those days was prohibition. But it was less a moral issue than an economic one as liquor revenues were one of the few sources of money available to the territory.

The Great Depression of the 1930s was less difficult in Yukon than elsewhere in Canada due to the small population and the availability of locally grown produce. However, the Council, whose members were frequently chosen by acclamation, met infrequently and had little room to manoeuvre as grants from Ottawa were reduced to a minimum.

In 1937 the Council found themselves facing a major crisis when Ottawa and British Columbia appeared to have worked out a deal that would annex Yukon to British Columbia. This proposal had little local support and was eventually stopped by a strange coalition consisting of the Roman Catholic Church which objected to the lack of protection for separate schools in British Columbia, and European, mainly British, shareholders of certain mining

companies who feared higher taxes.

The war brought tremendous change to Yukon including the building of the Alaska highway and the installation of an United States air strip in Whitehorse. Council had little input into these momentous changes but the need for housing, roads and social programs provided plenty of problems for them to deal with.

Following the war the main issue was whether the capital should be moved from Dawson to Whitehorse as the latter was developing at a much faster rate. There was also discussion of incorporating part of the Northwest Territories, which had only an appointed Council, with Yukon. After years of debate and fierce opposition from Dawson City, a decision was taken by the federal government to move the capital to Whitehorse.

The author makes frequent references to the status of women and aboriginals in Yukon politics. Not until 1967 was the first female legislator elected and it took two more decades before the first aboriginal legislators were elected. Despite the absence of these groups the author concludes that the elected Councils were instrumental in allowing the Yukon to maintain a separate identity and provided the constitutional foundation for the present Territory. Responsible government was attained in 1979 when new letters of instruction were issued by the federal government to the Commissioner.

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