

Tough End to Parliament, Christmas 2012.

Wednesday December 19, 2012

Parliament came to an end on Wednesday night last week, with a unanimous consent motion that stopped the sitting with two days left on the official calendar. The mood of our major democratic institution had been as low as I have seen it over the past seven years. Putting 308 people tightly together in a setting that is confrontational and highly competitive can have a detrimental impact on the most generous of souls.

Both sides of the House have their reasons for feeling no love. The Opposition, strong on social justice, equality of income, workers' rights, and environmental protection, see that the impact of globalization and the world financial crisis are giving the ruling Conservatives room to change the fabric of our country in so many vital ways. Fighting a losing battle this year over two major omnibus bills has been difficult on interparty relations to say the least. With a Conservative majority in the House and in the 25 Standing Committees, the opportunities to focus attention and elicit the facts about a plethora of legislative changes has been sadly lacking. On top of this, closure on debate has been put into play over 30 times, by the Government in the House of Commons.

Since summer, the Conservative Government has faced unbudgeted expanding deficits, failed programs like the F35 fighter planes, unpopular changes to Employment Insurance, and highly controversial resource development decisions like the sale of Nexen and the proposed Gateway Pipeline.

However, Parliament will be back at the end of January and the next session promises to have a lot of action for NWT issues. Even before the session starts, there are plans for the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Committee to hold hearings in Yellowknife to hear from Northerners on the Surface Rights Board Act, which is part of Bill C-47. This Act will establish a 5 member board that will guarantee access to resource developers to all land in the NWT, where sub-surface interests have been established (compensation and conditions will be decided). Much of the opposition to this Bill will likely come from First Nations, especially from those who are still negotiating their land claims.

This northern hearing will be followed by a debate and final vote in the House of Commons on this legislation, likely late in February.

It has come to my attention that the long anticipated and controversial changes to the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act have been sent to various interest groups in the NWT. This legislation, which the Government has been promising for a while will follow the direction started with the McCrank Report and continued over the past three years with the appointment of John Pollard as the Government's front man.

The question of creating a single NWT Land and Water "Superboard" is real problem with this legislation. Most stakeholders in the NWT have expressed their opposition to it at one time or the other.

Other NWT issues that will need attention include the ongoing saga of our GNWT borrowing limit. This was upped in the last Federal Budget to 800 million, but because of the inclusion of self-liquidating loans and financial transactions in this total the GNWT will be at this new limit very shortly. This does not include the matching dollars for the Federal investment of 150 million in the Inuvik - Tuk Highway or the 250 million for the renovation to the Stanton Territorial Hospital. Our growing Territory needs investment and the financial shackles will have to be lifted.

I look forward to bringing out more information on these topics and many others moving forward in 2013.

To all of you, a very happy holiday season with friends and family.

May the sun shine brightly on your plans for the New Year.