

# From the House

By Dennis Bevington MP Western Arctic

## Devolution: A Complex Issue Yet to be Understood

Last session, after a vote in the Legislative Assembly refusing a plebiscite on the Devolution draft agreement, has left little doubt that, short of a snap Federal Election or a successful court challenge by the First Nations not yet signatories, that this particular deal is done. Premier Macleod has indicated that no changes will be allowed, that it is a take it or leave it proposition and that most of the MLAs and Cabinet are onside.

The pattern is set and negotiations continue for the transfer of government positions. There are millions of dollars in the 2013 Federal Budget to manage the change. For most NWT residents, the changes to our authority structures will be not easily apparent, until the agreement is fully functioning. For unless the GNWT decentralizes some of the Federal positions being transferred, devolution may start off as a non-event for over 80 percent of our communities.

The people of the Northwest Territories need these processes to be transparent and not coated with bureaucratic wordsmithing. All of the information must be provided so that there is a meaningful dialogue to understand what is going to happen, or not happen, with the transfer of public responsibility.

Take for instance the responsibilities for the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act (MVRMA) that are simply being delegated, not transferred by law. As a member of the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board from its beginning until 2001, I have a great interest in how this will function in its new configuration.

The Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act is a unique document in Canada. It has the responsibility to look at the social, cultural, economic and environmental wellbeing of the people of the NWT. It was designed to ensure that the things provinces should do automatically, in the provincial self-interest, would be given consideration by the Federal Government.

When one looks at the Final Agreement, the roles are laid out in a legislative language that would defy 99 percent of the population from understanding. Simply put, the Federal Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development has delegated some of his powers and responsibilities and held others back. The contentious issue of appointments to the Boards remains in the Federal control, as do the purse-strings for these boards.

Also, when it comes to the approval of the terms of resource developments, like mines, pipelines and oil and gas wells, the situation is less clear. The Minister of Environment, (or perhaps the Minister of Industry, Trade and Investment?) will assume the role of the Federal Minister in assessing the projects along with the relevant other Federal Ministers.

This is what the agreement says. So it appears as the decision making will now be shared between two governments. This should set off some alarm bells!

The changes to the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act are just one issue of many that need to be clearly understood. I encourage all northerners to take an active interest in what is happening with this Agreement. By understanding what is possible and needed for our future, we will be more likely to be successful.

As the sole representative from the NWT in Parliament, where devolution will be studied and debated within the year, I welcome any knowledge and information that can guide my efforts on your behalf.