

*Representing the Great White North: The Northern Ontario M.P.P. Experience*

By:

Chelsea Peet

2008-2009 Intern  
Ontario Legislature Internship Programme (OLIP)  
1303A Whitney Block,  
Queen's Park  
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Word Count: 7, 951

Phone: 416-325-0040

Email: [cbnpeet@gmail.com](mailto:cbnpeet@gmail.com)

[www.olip.ontla.on.ca](http://www.olip.ontla.on.ca)

Paper presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Ottawa, Ontario, Wednesday, May 27th, 2009.

## *Introduction*

“My great frustration is that people in southern Ontario don’t have a grasp of the size of the province. I often had difficulties getting other members of my own cabinet to fully appreciate how large the ridings and the province were. I used to carry around a little map I drew in my pocket so I could reference it for them.” – *Lyn McLeod, former Liberal Leader, Fort William*

“There’s a bit of a romanticism of the north so that when northern MPPs try to address the challenges facing the north, like poverty and distances and industry, it can be hard to get people past the romantic notions to get them to realize the issues.” – *Monique Smith, Nipissing*

“Being an MPP from the north, you’re actually “a somebody.” People know you, have met you more than once and have socialized with you. People feel like they have a more personal relationship and connection to their MPP in the north than is the case in southern Ontario.” – *David Ramsay, Timiskaming-Cochrane*

“When I first came, there was a reporter here at Queen’s Park to report specifically on northern issues, a columnist, plus CBC radio reporters too. Now, the press gallery is smaller. It’s made it more difficult for northern MPPs to get coverage of issues that matter to the north, and coverage is important.” – *Howard Hampton, Kenora-Rainy River*

Arguably, for as long as Ontario has existed as a province in Confederation there has been an element of mystery surrounding its north. For this reason, it should hardly be surprising that this obscurity would permeate Ontario’s northern Members of Provincial Parliament (MPP). The purpose of this study is to uncover and describe the struggles and rewards associated with being an MPP from northern Ontario. It should be noted that in many ways, the stories told speak to the larger issue of what it is like to be an MPP in northern remote areas, in general. However, there is an unparalleled experience enjoyed only by the 11 MPPs who represent nearly 90% of Ontario’s land mass, and 6% of its population.<sup>1</sup> It is this added dimension that this paper looks to capture. The study has been compiled based on:

- Interviews with 10 of the current 11 northern Ontario Members of Provincial Parliament as well as an interview with former MPP from Thunder Bay-Atikokan and leader of the Ontario Liberal Party from 1992-1996.
- Personal observations from a 10 month non-partisan internship with the Ontario Legislature
- A review of the literature describing the politics, policy and alienation characteristic of northern Ontario

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Northern Development and Mines. *Northern Ontario Overview*. [http://www.mndm.gov.on.ca/nordev/documents/sector\\_profiles/northern\\_ontario\\_e.pdf](http://www.mndm.gov.on.ca/nordev/documents/sector_profiles/northern_ontario_e.pdf) (Accessed January 20, 2009).

- A review of Bill 81, The Fewer Politicians Act (1996), and Bill 214, The Representation Act (2005), as well as Hansard documents recording comments on these Bills.

The study will expose unique northern MPP perspectives of legislative life in Ontario. The first section will outline northern Ontario and the challenges that have plagued the area in recent history. Pairing this analysis with members' thoughts on the view that the north is politically alienated, it will be demonstrated that while the area faces special political circumstances that influence its representation at Queen's Park, it has also received significant attention from Ontario governments. Looking to uncover how changing political boundaries affect northern Ontario, a discussion of Bill 81, The Fewer Politicians Act, shows how a decrease in representation in the north from 15 members to 11, negatively impacted their ability to represent the area effectively and damaged democracy in the province as a whole. This section leads into the occasionally debated question of whether northern Ontario would benefit from separating from the rest of the province, and how feasible such a plan might be. Woven throughout the paper is the story of what it means for MPPs to represent northern Ontario and how their experience differs from southern members. Finally, Recommendations for the north to become more engaged in the current political climate will be suggested.

### ***Section One: Northern Ontario and its MPPs:***

Before describing what it is to be a northern MPP at Queen's Park, it is important to understand the term "north." According to Ontario's Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, northern Ontario covers over 800,000 square kilometers of land. It extends across two time zones, from the southern boundary of the District of Parry Sound, north to the Hudson Bay, and westerly from Quebec to the Manitoba border.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, "north" is misleading in terms of the area's geography. The vast majority of the region lies to the south of the southern boundaries of western provinces. Thunder Bay for example, a major city in the northwest, is well to the south of Winnipeg, Manitoba.<sup>3</sup> The geology and climate however, which are similar to northern Scandinavia or Alaska, produce the region's northern atmosphere.<sup>4</sup>

In language that political academics and strategists can appreciate, northern Ontario currently consists of 11 electoral ridings out of a possible 107 in the province. This number symbolizes approximately 10% of the seats in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. The 11 northern electoral districts as defined by Elections Ontario include: Algoma-Manitoulin, Kenora-Rainy River, Nickel Belt, Nipissing, Parry-Sound-Muskoka, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury, Thunder Bay-Atikokan, Thunder Bay-Superior North, Timiskaming-Cochrane, and Timmins-James Bay.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Weller. "Politics and Policy in the North." *The Government and Politics in Ontario*. Graham White, ed. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. University of Toronto Press Inc. 1997. 286

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Elections Ontario. *Electoral Districts*. <http://www.elections.on.ca/en-CA/Tools/ElectoralDistricts/>. (accessed January 15, 2009).

The question then arises: who are northern MPPs and what does it mean to represent the north? Jim Coyle of the Toronto Star deemed the group of members among the most “colourful and feisty” in the Legislature. They are cabinet ministers like “Pink” Floyd Laughren, and the “King of the Northwest,” Leo Bernier. They are the leaders of their parties, as seen in the Progressive Conservative’s (PC) Mike Harris, the Liberal’s Lyn McLeod, and the New Democratic Party’s (NDP) Howard Hampton. Northern MPPs are tough, hard working, funny, vocal, kind and memorable. More importantly though, they have been known to be “the most committed to helping southerners understand their region.”<sup>6</sup> The following table outlines the names, ridings and legislative experience of Ontario’s northern Members of Provincial Parliament that sat for interviews.

<b>NAME and POLITICAL PARTY</b>	<b>RIDING</b>	<b>EXPERIENCE IN THE ONTARIO LEGISLATURE</b>
Mike Brown (Liberal)	Algoma-Manitoulin	1987-Present
Howard Hampton (NDP)	Kenora Rainy-River	1987-Present
France Gelinas (NDP)	Nickel Belt	2007-Present
Monique Smith (Liberal)	Nipissing	2003-Present
Norm Miller (PC)	Parry-Sound-Muskoka	2001-Present
David Oraziatti (Liberal)	Sault Ste. Marie	2003-Present
Bill Mauro (Liberal)	Thunder Bay-Atikokan	2003- Present
Michael Gravelle (Liberal)	Thunder Bay-North Superior	1995-Present
David Ramsay (Liberal)	Timiskaming-Cochrane	1985-Present
Gilles Bisson (NDP)	Timmins-James Bay	1990- Present
Lyn McLeod (Liberal)	Former Liberal Leader from Thunder Bay, and MPP from Thunder Bay-Atikokan	1987-2003

Other than being a list of names and places, the above list provides a window into the soul of northern Ontario and the people committed to representing the region. With more than half of the MPPs on the list having served in the legislature for more than a decade, it demonstrates the high level of incumbency for northern MPPs. So too is the tie between the members. “There is a curious bond among northerners that crosses borders,” remarked Mike Brown.<sup>7</sup> Brought together by geographic distance, sparse population and the number of first nation’s communities, northern MPPs share common challenges. In turn, the MPPs have recognized an existing strong bond among them that is distinct from their relationships with members from southern Ontario.

## ***Section 2: Northern Challenges***

<sup>6</sup> Jim Coyle. *Interview*. May 9, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Brown. *Interview*. February 19, 2009.

“There is a resilience and a toughness to the north that isn’t shared by the south.”  
– *Michael Gravelle*.

### *The Economy*

Northern Ontario is best known for its vast natural resources, wilderness, water, and fisheries. The major economic industries include mining, forestry, power generation, transportation, tourism, and traditional hunting, fishing and trapping. Mining dominated the northeast, while forestry took hold in the northwest.<sup>8</sup> While the area currently struggles with serious economic woes that have left the region with a slowing population and a growing trend for out-migration, this has not always been the case. In fact, northern Ontario’s resource potential once meant that it was a hotly contested piece of land. “Northern resource rents were a primary contribution to the economy of Ontario,” and at one time, “nearly one quarter of government revenues were obtained from northern resources.”<sup>9</sup> Northern Ontario has played a significant role in the development of the province.

When asked about the politically unique challenges facing the north, the most frequent answer to come back from MPPs was the economy. The north is dominated by single industry towns. This reality manifests itself through the unique perspective in which MPPs approach representation in the Ontario Legislature. They inherently understand the nature of a boom and bust economy, and know first hand, the experience of hard times. Don Scott argues that the impact of having primary and extractive industries, as the north does, is psychologically damaging. Extractive industries are known to be transitory so that when the resource is exhausted, the industry leaves.<sup>10</sup> The effect of such fragile economy has been a crisis that has seen significant decreases in employment. As an example, northwestern Ontario’s average monthly employment was 116,525 in 2003. Two short years later in 2005, the number had dropped by almost 8% to reach 107,575. Manufacturing employment in the north during the same period dropped 18%.<sup>11</sup> While jobs were disappearing in the north, this period was recognized as “good economic times” in the south. The contrasting economic realities are indicative of the divide between the two regions. The lack of planning on the part of northern Ontario to see the vulnerability of towns dominated by single industries has led to an MPP experience that lives or dies with the economic issues in their cities and towns.

The economic divide between the north and south coalesces with the message from northern MPPs about their experience at Queen’s Park. The economic reality creates “issues that are bigger for northern members than perhaps the rest of the province,” said David Ramsay.<sup>12</sup> Often times, the livelihood of entire northern towns depends on the success of the single industries. Thus, northern MPPs bear the brunt of great responsibility to ensure the survival of the north. Effectively vocalizing the issues in

---

<sup>8</sup> Weller. 288.

<sup>9</sup> Livio Di Matteo. *Strategies for Developing A Broadly Based Regional Knowledge Economy in Northwestern Ontario*. <http://www.noacc.ca/> (accessed April 24, 2009)

<sup>10</sup> Don Scott. “Northern Alienation.” *Government and Politics of Ontario*. Donald C. MacDonald, ed. MacMillan of Canada: Maclean Hunter Press. 1975. 237.

<sup>11</sup> Di Matteo, Livio. *Strategies for Developing A Broadly Based Regional Knowledge Economy in Northwestern Ontario*. <http://www.noacc.ca/> (accessed April 24, 2009). 7.

<sup>12</sup> David Ramsay. *Interview*. February 24, 2009.

the Legislature is difficult and time consuming. “Sometimes northern members need to dramatize the importance of issues to ensure the survival of some of the towns...It can “take a lot out of you as an MPP.” Northern Ontario’s historic inability to diversify into a variety of industries has created challenges for its economy and has weighed on its style of representation at Queen’s Park.

The recognition that the north is a vastly different world from the south is not uncommon. Part of the difficulty this fact poses for the strained northern economy according to some northern MPPs is the challenge to make northern economic problems resonate at Queen’s Park. “Things resonate on two different levels at Queen’s Park,” said MPP France Gelinis.<sup>13</sup> “Job losses in the forestry sector happened far before losses in the manufacturing sector but getting this to register in southern Ontario and at Queen’s Park was really hard.” However, the recent economic troubles in southern Ontario’s manufacturing sector which has seen over 200,000 jobs disappear, has brought about opportunity for understanding between the regions. “The south has now gained a better understanding of the north because they are facing similar job losses. The south is now experiencing what the north has historically always faced,” recognized Ramsay.<sup>14</sup> Ensuring that northern economic troubles are understood in the Legislature has been difficult for MPPs. Only time will tell how the recent challenges in southern Ontario may develop the relationship between the regions, but there is a new opportunity to unite the province through their now shared economic experiences.

### *Geography: Vast and Remote*

Another commonly addressed issue that is unique to representing the north is the challenge posed by geography. Although northern Ontario covers approximately 90% of the area of the province, its population is a mere 786,000 people.<sup>15</sup> As this is indicative of only 6% of Ontario’s population, it does not make for large political representation. To provide some perspective of the size of ridings in the north, it has been noted in Hansard comments that Howard Hampton’s riding is 1/3 of the entire territory of the province of Ontario, or that Gilles Bisson’s riding of Timmins James-Bay is larger than the country of France.<sup>16</sup> The challenge posed by geography was recognized by every northern MPP that was interviewed. “Size [of the ridings] is a big difference for northern MPPs and it affects a lot,” stated Norm Miller.<sup>17</sup>

Part of the impact of large ridings is the ability of not only residents of southern Ontario to understand the distant and vast geography, but MPPs as well. “It’s not unusual for a southern member to say to me, ‘are you driving to Thunder Bay [from Queen’s Park]?’ or ‘Can you drop something off in Kenora. It’s close to (Thunder Bay),”<sup>18</sup> remarked MPP Gravelle. To be clear, Thunder Bay is approximately 6 hours by car from Thunder Bay. The comments demonstrate that the vast northern geography remains misunderstood in the south.

---

<sup>13</sup> France Gelinis. *Interview*. April 1, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Ramsay.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Northern Development and Mines. *Northern Ontario Overview*.

<sup>16</sup> The Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario. *Hansard*. October 10, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Norm Miller. *Interview*. February 25, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Gravelle. *Interview*. March 4, 2009.

A practical example of the reasoning for the south's lack of understanding of northern Ontario can be explained through members' commute to Queen's Park. While many MPPs within the Legislature understand what it is to commute given their 4 day a week, 8 month requirement to be in Toronto, the distance to northern Ontario adds a qualitative difference that is unique. Windsor, at the southern tip of the province is only about one tank of gasoline and a four hour drive. Thunder Bay by comparison, is two days by car, five tanks of gasoline, and the cost of a motel. Rarely having to experience first hand northern geography or the realities associated with it, it is understandable that southern MPPs would have little concept of that part of the province. The difficulty for southern MPPs to relate to northern Ontario contributes to the remoteness and alienation of northern Ontario.

The mystique surrounding the north is a barrier all northern MPPs struggle with overcoming. Their tactics in doing so are creative and often speak to the larger issue of engaging the general public in politics. Lyn McLeod professed that during the David Peterson era in the 1980s, the Premier took his entire caucus to Quetico, a remote area in the northwest. "It was an interesting way to impress upon people the size of the province. We flew 95 caucus members to Thunder Bay and drove to Quetico for the meeting."<sup>19</sup> Such an endeavour is an expensive way to promote knowledge among members. Other MPPs have chosen to communicate their ridings to Queen's Park in more tangible ways. Four MPPs mentioned services in their constituencies as a measurement of comparison. "Some city ridings may not have a school or a hospital, but I can't help but think that northern ridings are busier. My riding for example has 3 hospitals, 26 municipalities and 7 First Nations," described Miller.<sup>20</sup> Putting the riding in terms that southern members can relate to from their own experiences is a creative way of ensuring that northern concerns are understood in the Ontario Legislature.

For northern members it is costly and time consuming to leave Queen's Park to go home during the week and so in most cases, they do not. However, though northern geography may pose difficulties, it also has its advantages. Mr. Bisson described it best when he said that "the demands on northern MPPs are a bit different than those in southern Ontario."<sup>21</sup> It was frequently recognized during interviews that northern MPPs cannot be in two places at once. As such, they are often unable to attend constituency events in the evenings during the week whereas it is an expectation of many southern MPPs. McLeod noted that "it's somewhat an advantage in comparison to members in the south whose constituents expect their members to balance their constituency and Queen's Park work during the week." Smith concurred that "it's more of a reality than an advantage. I can't get back for events during the week whereas southern members are expected to go." Gelinas observed that she sees "southern Ontario members put in a full day and then do constituency work. It must be exhausting." While the northern geography makes it difficult for MPPs to represent Queen's Park to their ridings during the week, it also presents an arguably advantageous situation for balancing their work and private lives while they are in Toronto.

Another advantage to representing large remote areas like northern Ontario is what can be referred to as "big fish in a small pond" syndrome. The small populations

---

<sup>19</sup> Lyn McLeod. *Interview*. March 4, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Miller.

<sup>21</sup> Gilles Bisson. *Interview*. May 4, 2009.

and mentality that ‘everyone knows everyone’ characteristic of remote areas means that northern members have a more personal connection to their constituents. Contributing to this relationship, Bisson and Ramsay remarked that MPPs have complete access to the media in the north. Unlike southern Ontario where the density of MPPs in an area is such that they have to compete to be recognized in the media, this is not the case in the north. There is no need to worry about exposure. “David Ramsay or Gravelle in nearby ridings can say whatever they want. The likelihood that it will be picked up by the media in my riding is slim,” said Bisson.<sup>22</sup> “I once had someone in the media ask me for a story because they were short of stories that week. I think this is different than in the south where members pretty much have to jump off a building to get media,” reflected Ramsay.<sup>23</sup> Given that one of the big battles in politics is getting people to know your name, the unfettered access to the media provides sitting MPPs a huge advantage over new candidates during election time. This is reflected in the rate of incumbency seen in today’s MPPs with over half of them having served for more than a decade. The exposure and visibility courtesy of the media in northern Ontario give MPPs an edge. They facilitate a process whereby MPPs are, as one member put it, “the only show in town.”

### *Political Alienation and the Toronto Centric View*

Part of the difficulty in northern Ontario is its physical isolation from the centre of economic and political power in the province, specifically Toronto. There are a number of academic articles which allude to the alienation characteristic of northern Ontario. Geoffrey Weller argues that a sense of disaffection pervades northern Ontario. This grievance is “partly a reflection of a perceived ignorance of the north on the part of those at Queen’s Park or in the south in general.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Don Scott states that the political alienation is “bolstered by a widespread belief that that the provincial government’s programs for the north are piecemeal at best.”<sup>25</sup> The knowledge that northern Ontario feels disenfranchised from the centres of power within the province is established among academic circles.

In their service of Ontario’s citizens, Members of Provincial Parliament have the best understanding of the sentiment within their communities. They are the ears and voice of the province where citizens can focus their hopes and concerns, satisfactions and disgust. It has often been said at Queen’s Park that MPPs and their staff are part legislators and part therapist. This job title is one that the majority of MPPs are happy to host. Armed with vast knowledge of their people, northern MPPs almost on the whole recognized the feeling of alienation in the north. “Generally the north is misunderstood. People don’t understand the challenges that exist,” commented Monique Smith.<sup>26</sup> “There is an old adage up north that no one in southern Ontario understands anything north of highway 7,” agreed MPP Ramsay.<sup>27</sup> The notion that there is a feeling in the north of a

---

<sup>22</sup> Bisson.

<sup>23</sup> Ramsay.

<sup>24</sup> Weller. 285.

<sup>25</sup> Don Scott. “Northern Alienation.” *Government and Politics of Ontario*. Donald C. MacDonald, ed. MacMillan of Canada: Maclean Hunter Press. 1975. 244.

<sup>26</sup> Monique Smith. *Interview*. February 25, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Ramsay.

south that is antithetical toward their interests was acknowledged by all 11 people that were interviewed.

On the flip side, to say that the north is politically alienated is merely a fraction of the larger story according to northern MPPs. They all recognized the existing divide but a few went on to characterize it as misguided and praised southern Ontario for its efforts towards inclusion. “Southern members are very supportive of northern issues. Some northern issues are just challenging no matter who you are or where you come from,” commented Mike Brown.<sup>28</sup> Lyn McLeod went further to note that the north holds no monopoly on feelings of alienation in the province. In fact, the majority of her leadership campaign in 1992 focused on the ‘one size doesn’t fit all’ approach. “Ontario is such a diverse province. No single policy is effective for all. The way northerners feel about government is not necessarily any different than the way others in the province feel. Even people in Toronto are skeptical and feel that Queen’s Park is ignorant of their issues.”<sup>29</sup> Northern Ontario faces circumstances that leave residents feeling misunderstood and ignored by Queen’s Park, and yet alienation is a characteristic of much of modern society. What sets northern Ontario apart are the unique circumstances, including geography and its unstable economy, which add an exceptional dimension to the alienation of the north.

Perception is often more compelling than reality and so it was a refreshing change to gain a dose of the latter from Ontario’s MPPs when it comes to government’s treatment of its north. Ontario is fortunate in that it has the opportunity to examine what the three major political parties have offered the north in recent memory. Historically, some Ontario governments have worked hard to dispel northern alienation and create strong relationships. A good example mentioned by Mr. Orazietti was the Northern Ontario Relocation Program under Premier David Peterson. In the late 1980s, Peterson made plans to decentralize the provincial government and northern Ontario was a major recipient of this effort. The policy was designed to spread the wealth and stability that government jobs provided to a variety of areas across the province. The Northern Ontario Relocation Program (NORP), a component of this plan, saw eight different ministries and agencies encompassing 1,600 government jobs move to Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay and Sudbury.<sup>30</sup> Peterson has since been deemed by northern journalists, “the best advocate the north ever had.”<sup>31</sup>

While Peterson was revered for his leadership in the north, MPPs recognized the development of a newer trend. With no prompting from the interviewer, it was interesting that in discussions of alienation, the topic of the centralization of government was brought up by all three political parties. The view that southern Ontario’s lack of knowledge of its north stems from a system of power that is progressively dominated by the greater Toronto area (GTA) is alive and well in northern MPPs. Part of the reason as David Orazietti explained is because, “the critical mass of Ontario is in the GTA, so the decision making is very centralized.”<sup>32</sup> Reasonably, majority rules in a democracy, making it logical that southern issues factor larger in the decision making process.

---

<sup>28</sup> Brown.

<sup>29</sup> McLeod.

<sup>30</sup> Stan Sudol. “Grit’s Peterson was North’s Best Friend.” *Sudbury Star*. February, 20, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> David Orazietti. *Interview*. March 25, 2009.

However, this does not excuse neglect for northern issues. Separately, Howard Hampton's words rang similar. "If it didn't happen in Toronto, it didn't happen! Fewer important decisions are being made in northern Ontario and they're being made with little thought to northern communities."<sup>33</sup> Access to the doors of power and truth behind political spin is greater for MPPs than for anyone else in the province. Conversely, northern residents frequently have little inside knowledge of the decision making process at the Ontario Legislature. These truths and the Toronto centric sentiment expressed by Oraziotti, Gelinas, Hampton, and Miller, make it is easy to understand the disenfranchised sentiment among northern residents.

It is one thing for MPPs to express their opinion that government is becoming increasingly centralized and yet, the argument is not without merit. Norm Miller's statement that "the PC government was just as bad as the current government in making decisions with a Toronto light,"<sup>34</sup> or Howard Hampton's view that "Harris was very Bay Street focused, and McGuinty is GTA focused"<sup>35</sup> can be demonstrated with statistics. For example, from 1999 to 2004, the public administration employment in northern Ontario fell by 26% whereas it only fell by 11% in the rest of the province.<sup>36</sup> It is true that the Mike Harris years of government were classified by restraint and smaller government. Thus, downsizing of government across the province is understandable. However, the figures indicate that northern Ontario was a victim of a disproportionately large share of the Progressive Conservative government cutbacks. The decision can be linked to the March 2002 Statistics Canada census figures which reveal that northern Ontario lost 40,000 people over a five year period.<sup>37</sup> As jobs disappear so too do the reasons to stay in the north. The feeling of neglect is entrenched in northern Ontario and is only deepened when government fails to recognize the benefits of bringing government closer to the people.

### ***Section 3: The Fewer Politicians Act***

"Realistically, for one person to do the job that 4 people were doing before is impossible to do to the same degree of effectiveness." –*Mike Brown*

In 1995, the Progressive Conservative government came to power in Ontario promising reform of the way the province operated. Under the leadership of Premier Mike Harris, one of the changes that came to be was Bill 81, better known as the Fewer Politicians Act (1996). Bill 81 was intended to achieve savings by reducing the number of Ontario's provincial electoral districts from 130 to 103. The ridings would be divided into districts whose names and boundaries were identical to those of the federal electoral districts and would require redistribution whenever a readjustment took place at the federal level under the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act.<sup>38</sup> To explain the decision making process leading up to the Bill, Premier Harris said:

<sup>33</sup> Howard Hampton. *Interview*. March 5, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Miller.

<sup>35</sup> Hampton.

<sup>36</sup> Sudol.

<sup>37</sup> Ian Ross. "City Ignored Planners Warnings." *Northern Ontario Business*. April 1, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario. 38<sup>th</sup> Legislature. *Bill 81: The Fewer Politicians Act, 1996*. [www.ontla.on.ca/bills-files/36\\_Parliament/Session1/G96081e.htm](http://www.ontla.on.ca/bills-files/36_Parliament/Session1/G96081e.htm). (accessed January 27, 2009.)

People told us that Ontarians are among the most over governed people in the world. We heard repeatedly that government at every level had become too big...We had accumulated extra politicians, administrators, civil servants, etc....the message is this: savings will start at the top.<sup>39</sup>

For northern Ontario, the effect of the Fewer Politicians Act was a reduction of the number of ridings in the north from 15 to 11. At the time, opposition members argued that it was a sad time for Ontario with the province being left with a downsized democracy and a weakened voice for the north. The member from then Rainy River, Howard Hampton, said it was a “fundamental change in democracy in Ontario.”<sup>40</sup> Toronto MPP Mike Colle said the Premier was “walking away from democracy.” Pointing out what the decrease in ridings would do to the already vast electoral districts in the north, Frank Miclash, the Liberal MPP from Kenora stated on October 1, 1996, that:

Redistribution will give the member representing the Kenora-Rainy River riding one third of the land mass of the entire province. That’s over 307, 560 square kilometres to one member in this house. That’s bigger than the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island put together.<sup>41</sup>

Despite these calls, the Fewer Politicians Act passed and the Legislature was left with 27 fewer MPPs and significantly larger ridings in the north. This decision was partly reversed in 2005 when the Liberal government under Dalton McGuinty introduced Bill 214, The Representation Act 2005. As of October 10, 2007, the electoral boundaries no longer need to be identical to the federal electoral boundaries and the overall number of MPPs was increased from 103 to 107. The representation in the north however, remains at the current 11 electoral districts that existed in 2003.<sup>42</sup>

Ten years have passed since The Fewer Politicians Act was implemented in the 1999 election. MPPs have had an opportunity to adjust to the change and make conclusions as to what the shift has meant for their constituents and experience at Queen’s Park. The most common challenge addressed by northern MPPs was unsurprisingly, the larger ridings which they are required to represent. Of the 11 MPPs that were interviewed, all of them made some reference to the difficulties posed by representing larger geographical areas. “It’s a challenge to be the voice for the north because the riding is so big,” said Michael Gravelle.<sup>43</sup> Gilles Bisson commented that “the geography is impossible. The riding is so huge; I can’t be everywhere all the time.”<sup>44</sup>

For many, larger ridings have resulted in far more hours spent in vehicles traveling the ridings. “I went from a riding that took 3 hours to drive across to now 10 hours to drive across. There’s hardly a month that I don’t drive 5,000 km.” said Mike

---

<sup>39</sup> Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario. *Hansard*. October 1, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Elections Ontario.

<sup>43</sup> Gravelle.

<sup>44</sup> Bisson.

Brown.<sup>45</sup> Mr. Brown was not the only MPP to tell tales of traversing the north. Norm Miller put these kilometres into perspective for serving constituents. “I can drive 7 hours for a meeting. Three and a half one way to attend the meeting, and then I have to drive back. I put way more kilometres on my vehicle now.”<sup>46</sup> Given the number of MPPs that described the size of their northern ridings in terms of the amount of time spent driving across them, and the difficulty that many have expressed in explaining the north to southern MPPs, it can be concluded that expressing their ridings in terms of drivability presents a tangible way for them to share the realities of being a resident and MPP of northern Ontario.

Not surprisingly, the conversation of the number of ridings in the province also brought about discussions of representation by population. Part of the commitment of the Representation Act 2005 was a promise by the Government that the number of northern ridings would not sink below eleven, regardless of population fluctuation.<sup>47</sup> Currently, this provides the north an unfair advantage in the Legislature given its continually shrinking population. The Federal government for example, currently holds 10 ridings in northern Ontario. However, the promise is indicative of a respect for the limitations of the large geographic area and distinct thought process in the north.

Interestingly, without prompting, every Liberal member except for Brown, Ramsay and McLeod mentioned the difficulties for the north associated with representation by population. “The provincial government put in legislation saying that the north is not to go below 11 ridings even though the population doesn’t meet that standard in the legislature,” said MPP Mauro.<sup>48</sup> “It becomes too difficult to manage. We have to take into account the logistics of representing the north despite the representation by population argument,” added Monique Smith.<sup>49</sup> Conversely, Progressive Conservative member Norm Miller pointed out that “even if we did have more members in the north, we would have to compensate with more members in the house generally, so the north would still be outnumbered. We still need representation by population.”<sup>50</sup> The argument begets debate on all sides, but as a commonly mentioned theme, its relevance to the debate on The Fewer Politicians Act cannot be discounted.

Another theme that arose when discussing the Fewer Politicians Act and its affects on northern Ontario was the need for MPPs to take a broader approach to serving constituents. The result of amalgamating ridings was the combination of constituencies that often had vastly different needs. Two MPPs made mention of this task and both drew negative conclusions. “Nickel Belt was a mining and forestry riding whereas Sudbury East was an agricultural and tourism riding that was more than 50% French speaking...Joining them made for an odd combination of a riding,” commented MPP Gelinias.<sup>51</sup> Taking a broader approach means that an MPP cannot always advocate strongly for one set of interests as it may conflict with another. “This isn’t always a good

---

<sup>45</sup> Brown.

<sup>46</sup> Miller.

<sup>47</sup> Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario. 38<sup>th</sup> Legislature. *Bill 214: An Act to Amend the Election Act and the Legislative Assembly Act, to repeal the Representation Act, 1996 and enact the Representation Act, 2005.* [www.e-laws.gov.on.ca](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca) (Accessed January 15, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Bill Mauro. *Interview*. February 25, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Smith.

<sup>50</sup> Miller.

<sup>51</sup> Gelinias.

thing,” remarked MPP Mike Brown.<sup>52</sup> Their recognition points to the larger argument that democracy in the province of Ontario has indeed been downsized as a result of the decrease in MPPs in the Legislature. In order to represent everybody, concerns are being watered down and the risk of leaving particular interests unrepresented is greater.

Related to the need to take a broader approach to serving constituents is the concern that there is less time for individual issues. It is hardly surprising that northern members recognized this as a dilemma given the larger ridings they represent and the greater amount of time spent on the road. “It means less time per constituent than before. Before I could respond better to people’s individual concerns,” commented Gilles Bisson.<sup>53</sup> Lyn McLeod shared that “it takes a lot to keep in touch. Granted the shrinking northern populations mean that there aren’t as many people to keep in touch with, but it became that much more difficult [with the Fewer Politicians Act] to serve people.”<sup>54</sup> Putting the change into perspective of reactions in the north, MPP Brown noted that “I still hear ‘well you’re not around as much anymore.’”<sup>55</sup> This quote demonstrates that northern residents have noticed a difference in their representation to their detriment. Bill 81 has challenged the north by making it difficult for people to establish and maintain a connection with their MPPs. It has also challenged northern MPPs who typically have a great deal of personal contact with their voters to find innovative ways to maintain their relationships.

Three northern members recognized the impact that shifting political boundaries has for expressing northern issues in the Legislature. Interestingly, all three of them have been at Queen’s Park for close to two decades and have the benefit of long term experience before and after, to vouch for their claims. David Ramsay, Howard Hampton and Gilles Bisson when discussing the Fewer Politicians Act all mentioned the deterioration of influence in the north. “It’s a huge loss of influence for northern Ontario. When there were 15 seats in the north, cabinet wanted to know what their thoughts were and how decisions would affect the north because 15 seats could make or break you in an election,” said Howard Hampton.<sup>56</sup> “It’s a bigger challenge now, because there are fewer of us. There are less of us to make a case for northern Ontario,” concurred David Ramsay.<sup>57</sup> Weighing the pros and cons of the ramifications for the individual MPP as well as the group, Bisson showed unique insight. “On an individual level, it’s increased individual northern voices at Queen’s Park because we represent larger ridings and there are fewer of us to compete with for media. As a whole though, we in the north are worse off.”<sup>58</sup>

To summarize not only what Bill 81 has meant for MPPs, but for the north in general, it is helpful to recall Weller’s argument that northern Ontario suffers from a feeling of disaffection.<sup>59</sup> Based on the comments made by all MPPs who were interviewed, it can be concluded that overall, the north is worse off as a result of the decision to remove 27 MPPs from the Legislature. According to the members that serve

---

<sup>52</sup> Brown.

<sup>53</sup> Bisson.

<sup>54</sup> McLeod.

<sup>55</sup> Brown.

<sup>56</sup> Hampton.

<sup>57</sup> Ramsay.

<sup>58</sup> Bisson.

<sup>59</sup> Weller. 285.

them, the alienation that is characteristic of northern citizens has only been amplified by the change and has left people feeling further disenfranchised with the political process. They have less access to members' time and in some cases, are required to travel greater distances to meet them. It is important to remember that the individual voices that speak for the north have been empowered and that the reduction in seats was proportional across the board in the province, and yet, in politics perception matters as much as fact. The significance of knowing and having access to your MPP in the north is such that true or not, having fewer MPPs is perceived as another example of the north being short changed by Queen's Park. As MPP Brown said, "Northerners have a different way of looking at the world. Sometimes they're not more marginalized, they just feel like they are."<sup>60</sup>

#### ***Section 4: Whither A Separated North***

"You can't grow up, whether you are a kid or a political entity, until you are accountable for your actions. Northern Ontario has little jurisdiction over anything that matters. This needs to change."<sup>61</sup> – *Rethinking Northern Ontario*

The recognition that northern Ontario is unlike the rest of the province has manifested itself in a number of ways. From the creation of the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines which examines ways to build a stronger north, to the health travel grant provided to northerners to alleviate transportation costs for faraway healthcare, northern Ontario is a different political animal than the south. One of the more exciting ways northern Ontario has chosen to show its independence is through its periodic calls for secession from the rest of the province. Calls for separation were intermittent and minor from the 1870s to the First World War.<sup>62</sup> Not until October 19, 1977 were northern Ontario's feelings of disaffection given its greatest voice and name in Ed Deibel, the leader, founder and driving force behind the Northern Ontario Heritage Party (NOHP).<sup>63</sup> Deibel, a North Bay motel operator who sold his business to work full time for northern separation, was committed to obtaining "social, economic and cultural justice" for the people of Ontario.<sup>64</sup> He summed up northern Ontario's oldest and recurring quarrel with the province when he said:

The fact that we have economically depressed communities through northern Ontario, the fact the economy of northern Ontario is well below that of the province as a whole, and the fact that the cost of living in northern Ontario is higher than in southern Ontario make the people of northern Ontario second class citizens, creating conflict and alienation that is unacceptable as a condition of government.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Brown.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Atkins, David Robinson & Livio DiMatteo. "Governance." *Rethinking Northern Ontario*. <http://blogs.northernlife.ca/matkins/2007>. Accessed April 16, 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Weller. 295.

<sup>63</sup> Gordon Brock. *The Province of Northern Ontario*. Cobalt, ON: Highway Book Shop. 1978. 34.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

With the party's dissatisfaction clear, they set out not to secede from Confederation, but to establish Northern Ontario as the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian province.

According to journalist Jim Coyle, Ed Deibel "didn't exactly take the north by storm back in the 1970s." His campaign to become an MPP in the Ontario Legislature netted a mere 625 votes, versus 15,000 for the winning candidate in the riding.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the crusader was able to drum up the necessary names, addresses and signatures of 10,000 people who were eligible to vote in an election, to register the Northern Ontario Heritage Party as a legitimate political party in the province of Ontario.<sup>67</sup> Clearly the man, whose trademark prop was a cartoon of a southern Ontario farmer milking a northern Ontario cow, had a following.<sup>68</sup> In fact, much to the amusement of northern Ontario, Deibel once camped out on the legislature lawns for 3 days with his oldest son Melvin, giving interviews to the media and onlookers until former premier William Davis agreed to meet with him. It is hardly any wonder that his hometown newspaper referred to him as "Premier Ed."

Ed Deibel quit the leadership of the Northern Ontario Heritage Party in 1980 and the party folded in 1984. However, the calls for separation continue to live on in the muttered and periodic fashion they have since the late 1800s. In a recent appearance on TVO's *The Agenda* with Steve Paikin, Lakehead University's Livio DiMatteo reasoned that there are valid arguments for separation. The political benefit is a government that would be closer to the people it affects, the economic argument that northern Ontario would have direct control over its own system of taxation, resource development and energy development.<sup>69</sup> In essence, the north would be more accountable and get a bigger say in their governance.

When asking today's northern Members of Provincial Parliament about their views on the topic of secession from Ontario, the answer was a resounding no. More than once the phrase "it's impossible" came back. The question arises however that if threats of separation continue to fester in northern Ontario, albeit without huge followings, why the firm opposition from their representatives? Perhaps the biggest barrier mentioned is the issue of feasibility. "We wouldn't have the resources to support the north as a separate political entity," said MPP Smith.<sup>70</sup> "We need the broader tax base from the rest of Ontario to run northern Ontario. Northern Ontario does not have the tax base to support separation," agreed Bill Mauro.<sup>71</sup> The notion that northern Ontario could go it alone is questionable at best according to its MPPs.

Separation of the north was also strongly opposed by all parties on the grounds that the secession movement in northern Ontario does not understand how well served it is by being part of Ontario. Despite opposition from separatists, MPPs say that the value of government services going into northern Ontario exceeds what leaves the region. "Some people think a lot more value goes out of northern Ontario than comes in, but I don't think this is actually the case," said Norm Miller.<sup>72</sup> Minister for Northern Development, Michael Gravelle qualified Miller's statement. "A lot of government

---

<sup>66</sup> Jim Coyle. "Redistribution: North gets electoral shock." *The Windsor Star*. October 17, 1996.

<sup>67</sup> Brock, 36.

<sup>68</sup> Coyle.

<sup>69</sup> TV Ontario. "Should the North Separate." *The Agenda With Steve Paikin*. April 15, 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Smith.

<sup>71</sup> Mauro.

<sup>72</sup> Miller.

resources go into the north, health care is one example.”<sup>73</sup> The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, which provides funds to northern entrepreneurs to develop private sector job creation and northern ingenuity, is another. By 2011, the fund will be close to \$100million a year to be spent strictly on northern development.<sup>74</sup> “Even with all the resources that we have in the north, we’d be worse off separating. Most northerners don’t want to realize this but we get more in revenue than we give,” said Bisson, concurring with the dominant Liberal and PC perspectives.<sup>75</sup> As proof, at the height of northern development in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, northern Ontario was responsible for 25% of government revenues, but this is certainly not the case today. Significant government resources demonstrate that the north benefits strongly from being a part of the province of Ontario.

There was one Member of Provincial Parliament who did not completely rule out the idea of separation but instead talked about public sentiment. “Seeing the saw mills close in northern Ontario but remain open in Manitoba; the sentiment is increasing,” remarked Howard Hampton. As Canada’s history has demonstrated through the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919 or the trek to Ottawa during the depression of the 1930s, people have been known to resort to drastic measures during difficult times. The Kenora Rainy-River MPP showed unique insight into the repercussions of an increasingly poor north. “Five years ago there was no realism to separation, but Ontario is becoming a much poorer province which has serious repercussions for the north.” He then gave credence to the problem of outmigration. Questioning the author’s experience where friends left the province once finished their schooling, he pointed out that “it’s not lost on me that most people who graduate high school in northern Ontario go to the University of Manitoba and they’re not coming back.”<sup>76</sup> As people begin to learn and work in other provinces, their identification with those areas becomes stronger and their tie to northern Ontario weaker. While this reality may lead to a greater sentiment for the separation of the north in the near future, it remains highly unlikely that it will lead to anything concrete in the long term.

Efforts to break away from Ontario may not be as prominent or vocal as they were in the days of Ed Deibel and the Northern Ontario Heritage Party, but they continue to persist. With opposition to the notion of separation firm in the minds of northern representatives, one is brought back to pondering the disconnect between the Legislature and citizens. The simplistic reason for the divide is that in any democracy, there is bound to be people who disagree with the status quo and government in general, and in turn decide they could do a better job themselves. However, there is a need to look beyond the simplistic. Do people in the north truly not understand the efforts that the Ontario government has made to help them? If this is the case, then there is a problem with our legislators’ ability to go beyond representing constituents at Queen’s Park, to representing the Ontario Legislature to constituents. Is there a greater need for public relations between the provincial government and the north to ensure that they are better connected and understanding of each other? Based on the responses of northern MPPs to the question of separation, the answer has to be yes. A lesson can be learned from the

---

<sup>73</sup> Gravelle

<sup>74</sup> Brown.

<sup>75</sup> Bisson.

<sup>76</sup> Hampton.

aforementioned David Peterson era of government where the vision of the north was one of capacity and opportunity. By acknowledging that the sentiment for separation stems mainly from the north's desire for recognition, discussions can be shaped to better demonstrate the benefits of their symbiotic relationship.

### *Final Thoughts*

“Politics in northern Ontario” reflected Gilles Bisson, “are much more interesting!”<sup>77</sup> While MPPs from southern Ontario might take issue with this statement, this paper has demonstrated that if nothing else, northern politics are unique within the province. The volatile northern economy that continues to struggle with its future direction, the vast and remote landscapes, and the concerns from MPPs that the north is disconnected from a Toronto centric government have led to an exceptional experience within the Ontario Legislature. Frequently discussed in the interviews, these three themes illustrate a region that feels they have little power to directly change their situation. Deserved or not, there is a distrust of Queen's Park and a sentiment that the Legislature does not understand the people or the reality of the north. This fact has resulted in a lack of recognition or appreciation for the efforts that the Ontario government does make to ensure the concerns of the north are heard and adhered to.

The feeling of alienation in the north was worsened with the passing of the Fewer Politicians Act and the reduction of northern representation from 15 seats in the Legislature to 11. While representation by population should be respected, regional identity, geography, and distance in the north poses additional challenges to MPPs that requires acknowledgement. Today, there are fewer members to advocate for the north and a greater need for them to spread their time over a larger group of people. The shift has also stirred the festering desire for independence. While separation is not a realistic or productive goal, it does bring to mind avenues for change that would satisfy the north. The authors of “Rethinking Northern Ontario” have suggested that rather than separation, northern Ontario should be given greater local control. Modeled after Britain's Sustainable Communities Bill, the idea is to move the thinking, planning, and accountability for northern Ontario, to northern Ontario. A top cabinet minister would be responsible for overseeing the process whereby a local body would put forward suggestions on how to improve the sustainability of their communities. What is good about the idea is its ability to appease both sides. It does not involve a greater monetary commitment from the government, but it would engage the north and better involve them in the decision making process that directly affects them. Beyond that, David Peterson's idea to decentralize government and move ministries to other parts of the province creates a more inclusive Ontario that benefits everybody. This is another suggestion the Ontario government could consider in its attempts to reduce the feeling of isolation and alienation in the north.

Northern Ontario's politics can be compared to, and witnessed in a variety of situations. For one, the story of northern Ontario can be viewed as representative of Canada as a whole. Internationally, Canada is seen as a huge area with a scattered population, a sizeable group of French speaking inhabitants, and an isolated Aboriginal people. Northern Ontario's identity is much the same. Further, within the nation's

---

<sup>77</sup> Bisson.

borders, as in Ontario, there are significant northern areas that all feel isolated from their southern governments. The alienation and regional disparity characteristic of northern Ontario is not entirely rare and might be small when compared to other areas of Canada. It remains though that Ontario's case is exceptional from northern parts of other provinces in that it makes up almost 90% of the province and harbours a mere 800,000 people. This poses difficulties for its MPPs who are responsible for ensuring that everyone in their riding is represented at Queen's Park and that what takes place at the Legislature also resonates with the citizens. There are challenges and opportunities within northern Ontario that have yet to be fully recognized by its government. The cultural and geographical qualities in the north are largely unfamiliar to the densely populated south and yet, they have been vital to shaping the stories of northern members of provincial parliament.

## Works Cited

- Atkins, Michael, David Robinson & Livio DiMatteo. "Governance." *Rethinking Northern Ontario*. <http://blogs.northernlife.ca/matkins/2007>. Accessed April 16, 2009.
- Bisson, Gilles. *M.P.P. Interview*. May 4, 2009.
- Gordon Brock, Gordon. *The Province of Northern Ontario*. Cobalt, ON: Highway Book Shop. 1978.
- Brown, Mike. *M.P.P. Interview*. February 19, 2009.
- Coyle, Jim. *Interview*. May 9, 2009.
- Coyle, Jim. "Redistribution: North gets electoral shock." *The Windsor Star*. October 17, 1996.
- Di Matteo, Livio. Strategies for Developing A Broadly Based Regional Knowledge Economy in Northwestern Ontario. <http://www.noacc.ca/> (accessed April 24, 2009).
- Elections Ontario. *Electoral Districts*. <http://www.elections.on.ca/en-A/Tools/ElectoralDistricts/>. (accessed January 15, 2009).
- Hampton, Howard. *M.P.P. Interview*. March 5, 2009.
- Gelinas, France. *M.P.P. Interview*. April 1, 2009.
- Gravelle, Michael. *M.P.P. Interview*. March 4, 2009.
- Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario. 38<sup>th</sup> Legislature. *Bill 81: The Fewer Politicians Act, 1996*. [www.ontla.on.ca/bills-files/36\\_Parliament/Session1/G96081e.htm](http://www.ontla.on.ca/bills-files/36_Parliament/Session1/G96081e.htm). (accessed January 27, 2009.)
- Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario. 38<sup>th</sup> Legislature. *Bill 214: An Act to Amend the Election Act and the Legislative Assembly Act, to repeal the Representation Act, 1996 and enact the Representation Act, 2005*. [www.e-laws.gov.on.ca](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca) (Accessed January 15, 2009).
- Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario. *Hansard*. October 1, 1996.
- Mauro, Bill. *M.P.P. Interview*. February 25, 2009.
- McLeod, Lyn. *M.P.P. Interview*. March 4, 2009.
- Miller, Norm. *M.P.P. Interview*. February 25, 2009.

Ministry of Northern Development and Mines. *Northern Ontario Overview*. [http://www.mndm.gov.on.ca/nordev/documents/sector\\_profiles/northern\\_ontario\\_e.pdf](http://www.mndm.gov.on.ca/nordev/documents/sector_profiles/northern_ontario_e.pdf) (Accessed January 20, 2009).

Oraziotti, David. *M.P.P. Interview*. March 25, 2009.

Ross, Ian. "City Ignored Planners Warnings." *Northern Ontario Business*. April 1, 2002.

Ramsay, David. *M.P.P. Interview*. February 24, 2009.

Sudol, Stan. "Grit's Peterson was North's Best Friend." *Sudbury Star*. February, 20, 2004.

Scott, Don. "Northern Alienation." *Government and Politics of Ontario*. Donald C. MacDonald, ed. MacMillan of Canada: Maclean Hunter Press. 1975.

Smith, Monique. *M.P.P. Interview*. February 25, 2009.

TV Ontario. "Should the North Separate?" *The Agenda With Steve Paikin*. April 15, 2009.

Weller, Geoffrey. "Politics and Policy in the North." *The Government and Politics in Ontario*. Graham White, ed. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. University of Toronto Press Inc. 1997.