Nunavut's new senator fills out his to-do list

"The way I look at it now, the stars are lining up."

JIM BELL

Nunavut's new Conservative senator, Dennis Patterson, says his entry to the Red Chamber last week is a sign the "stars are lining up" for Nunavut at a time when territorial representatives prepare to wield unprecedented clout in Ottawa.

"We have the MP for Nunavut who is a senior federal cabinet minister. We've never had that before. We never had that access and influence at the highest levels of decision-making... We have a government that is genuinely interested in the North," Patterson said.

Patterson took his oath of office Sept. 15. In a rare display of non-partisan solidarity, Liberal Senator Charlie Watt of Nunavik led him to the front of the chamber and stood with him during the ceremony.

Patterson, like all of the nine new senators who Stephen Harper appointed earlier this month, promises he will step down in eight years — a period of time equivalent to the term limit for senators that Harper wants to legislate into existence.

And eight years from now, when the Nunavut senate seat will once again become vacant, Patterson is not against the idea of holding an election to fill the seat.

"I think it's a very worthwhile idea. I did have a discussion with the prime minister about the senate reform agenda. My impression is that the eight-year term is only the first initiative. I'm anxious to get involved and find out what's next," Patterson said.

Nunavut's new senator, Dennis Patterson, takes his oath of office in the Senate chamber Sept. 15, as Senator Charlie Watt, Senate government leader Marjory LeBreton, and Mark Audcent, a Senate law clerk, look on. (PHOTO BY DENNIS DREVER)

Members of the governing Conservatives now represent two of Canada's three territories in the Senate. The Yukon seat is occupied by Daniel Lang, a Tory politician appointed in December 2008, while the Northwest Territories is represented by the only non-Tory, Liberal Nick Sibbeston.

"These forces don't always align. I see it as an enormous opportunity to make things happen," Patterson said. "But this government is not only talking the talk. They want to do things in the North. After being a bystander since 1995, I now have a chance to hopefully make a difference."

Patterson, who served as MLA for Iqaluit (1979-1995), cabinet minister (1980-1993) and NWT premier (1987-1991), says he remembers times when the northern territories had to struggle even to be included in annual first ministers' meetings.

In his day, the Government of the Northwest Territories fought what he calls "a huge battle" just to wrest control of the territorial government's budget from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

That issue wasn't resolved until 1985, when Ottawa began to supply the territories with annual block funding grants and created the first territorial formula financing agreements.

"I've seen those challenges from the point of view of a territory when I didn't always have easy access to federal ministers and getting on the agenda," Patterson said, referring to his time served as NWT premier between 1987 and 1991.

He cautions, however, that as a senator, he has the power to advise but not to decide.

But some big issues are popping up already near the top of Patterson's to-do list, especially issues where he can offer help to Nunavut MP Leona Agglukaq, who in addition to her responsibilities as national health minister, also serves as the federal government's regional minister for the North.

One is the bitter dispute between Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. and the federal government over implementation of the Nunavut land claims agreement, which in 2006 led NTI to launch a billion-dollar lawsuit against the federal government.

Saying it's in no one's interest to resolve this conflict through an "expensive, time-consuming, confrontational, litigation process," Patterson believes there may be a way to quietly bring the two sides towards an out-of-court settlement.

"It certainly isn't too late to explore alternatives," he said.

Another is the devolution from Ottawa to Nunavut responsibility over public lands, resources, and resource revenues.

That's an issue Patterson knows inside out. His last consulting job prior to his Senate appointment was to act as NTI's chief negotiator on the devolution file.

"I'm totally briefed on it," Patterson said.

It's also an issue that Patterson pioneered. In 1988, while premier of the NWT, Patterson began negotiating a devolution deal with Brian Mulroney's federal government called the Northern Energy Accord.

His objective at the time was to achieve a devolution deal prior to division of the Northwest Territories, so that Nunavut would begin life with a resource-revenue sharing agreement and control over public lands.

But that deal fell apart due to objections from various aboriginal organizations, mostly in the NWT, who wanted a share of resource money for their own regional entities.

"We got close in the 1980s, but I didn't quite finish the job, though we got to the agreement-in-principle stage," Patterson said.

Another issue, Patterson said, is federal fisheries allocations.

If he and Leona Aglukkaq can make progress fixing that and other problems, Patterson believes they can silence those who object to his appointment because of his non-Inuit ethnicity.

"Leona Aglukkaq wants to work with me. She's an Inuk and has welcomed me to my new post. I think if we can get results on issues that are outstanding involving Inuit, I'm hoping that people will look beyond the symbolic importance of having an Inuk there," Patterson said.

And he points out that he won the Iqaluit seat in the NWT legislative assembly four times, with the support of Inuit residents.

"I couldn't have got elected if I hadn't got support from Inuit, and I was running against reputable people like Ben Ell and Abe Okpik."

He also points out that his race was not a problem when he worked on the Nunavut project with leaders such as Ipellie Kilabuk, Joe Arlooktook and Ludy Pudluk.

His race wasn't a problem either when he served as NWT minister of aboriginal rights and constitutional development and became deeply involved with the Nunavut land claims agreement.

And he suggested that because he's part of an ethnic minority in Nunavut, he'll have to try harder to win acceptance.

"If you get criticized for something that you can't do anything about, maybe you will work more zealously," Patterson said.

As for his place of residence — another issue that produced some criticism of Patterson's appointment — Patterson says he's "most anxious to establish residency here in Iqaluit," where he's owned a house since 1987.

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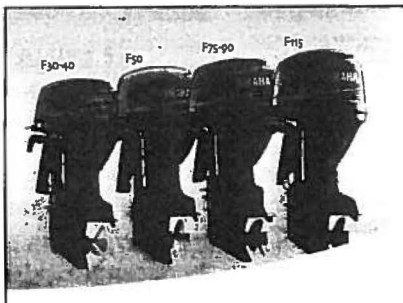

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