

Written Submission

on the 2025 Electoral Boundaries Commission Interim Report

Name/Nom Kieron Testart, MLA Range Lake

Date January 9, 2026

Submission/Message

Dear Judge Gorin,

I would like to commend the Electoral Boundaries Commission on its thorough interim report and strong evidence-based proposals for changes to electoral districts in the NWT. I believe strongly in the need for robust democratic rights and institutions as we witness the breakdown of order and the rise of authoritarianism around the world. Northerners deserve an electoral system that guarantees their voices are heard and their will is effectively acted upon.

Although I have the distinct honour of serving as an elected member of the Legislative Assembly, I write to you in my capacity as a citizen and not as the MLA for Range Lake. To that end, I believe strongly that Northerners would be best served by Option 4— 22 District Model.

1. Democratic and Political Rights

For more than a decade the electoral boundaries of the NWT have remained unchanged. This state of affairs has effectively ensured thousands of Northerners and their communities have not received effective representation in the Legislative Assembly over the same period. As the Commission notes in its report, "Since the electoral boundaries were last changed in 2013, there has been a major growth in population in Behchokò, and parts of Yellowknife. These areas are now not effectively represented." Some of these deficiencies have been present for far longer. For example, the need for an additional district in Yellowknife has been identified going back at least to 2008. Not only are there serious charter rights issues that arise with the current degree of underrepresentation, but it further impacts the work of the legislative assembly in discharging its duties to the public through legislation functions and administering the public government. Each elected member brings with them experience, ability, and representation that enriches and enhances the work of government and lawmakers.

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A larger assembly is one with more capacity to deliver results to the electorate, ensure that the needs of the public are met, and equally ensure good value for money for the spending of taxpayer dollars.

2. Comparative Legislatures

The other small jurisdictions in Northern Canada both have districts exceeding the current number in the NWT, with Nunavut at 22 and Yukon at 21, after the former increased their seats prior to their 2025 election. Statistics Canada 2005 Q4 data pegs the populations of the three territories at 41,919 for Nunavut, 48,261 for Yukon, and 45,848 for the NWT. With comparable geographies and population sizes, these examples offer compelling evidence for the need to expand the number of districts. Option 4 is therefore not out of line with Canada's Territories, and failing to move to 22 (or 21 seats minimum) would see the NWT fall behind.

3. Regional Balance and Indigenous Representation

The immense geography and cultural diversity of the NWT present a unique challenge to ensure communities are adequately represented. This is another reason to consider 22 districts as a superior option, as it will ensure a legislature that ensures representation of all peoples, geographic regions, and cultural communities. Ensuring that each Indigenous Nation in the NWT has appropriate and distinct representation is of paramount importance in this regard.

I will note under this section that whatever option that the Commission ultimately decides, the Ingraham Trail should not be included in the Tu Nedhe—Willideh electoral district. While this area falls within Akaitcho traditional territory, that of the Yellowknives Dene, most residents in the area form a community of interest with the greater Yellowknife area.

4. Futureproofing

This is a prudent investment in the future of our democracy for the reasons previously mentioned, and it is long overdue. As the Commission is aware, it has proven extremely difficult to ensure electoral districts accurately reflect the population of the NWT in the regions where it is growing.

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There are good reasons for politicians in previous assemblies to have been protective of the regional balance between electoral districts, but pushing the boundaries to the legal limits is a short-term measure that must now be addressed. The 2020 commission process and the subsequent failure of the 19th Legislative Assembly to act on its recommendations is another example of the difficult political circumstances of boundary redistribution. By putting in place Option 4 now, we ensure fair representation under the charter today and allow for those boundaries to grow with the population in the years ahead. Barring a catastrophic population collapse or serendipitous growth boom, 22 districts will ensure these issues are not repeated, at least for some time or until a new process is adopted by lawmakers.

5. District Naming

Finally, as to the Commission's consideration of the names of electoral districts, I recommend retaining the existing names for Yellowknife ridings that do not receive significant changes to their boundaries, notwithstanding the problematic nature of "Great Slave," which the Commission has made excellent observations on and should be changed to something that is culturally appropriate and relevant to Indigenous peoples. These longstanding district names are well-known to their residents, which benefits the public in understanding where they should vote, which candidates are seeking their support, and who ultimately is the MLA representing their interests. New names should be considered with caution to avoid erosion of these benefits to public awareness of the democratic process wherever possible.

Thank you for your consideration of this letter and your service to the people of the Northwest Territories.

Yours truly,

Kieron Testart