

DENNIS FENTIE (1950–2019)

On 30 August 2019, the Yukon lost one of its former premiers, Dennis Fentie. Born in Edmonton, Alberta, on 8 November 1950 and raised by his mother Mary, Dennis Fentie moved to Watson Lake, Yukon, in 1962 where he completed high school in 1968. In addition to serving as a bartender, he was involved in a number of business ventures, notably logging and mining and was owner of Francis River Construction Company. During his business career he served as director of the Association of Yukon Forests and was elected director of the Watson Lake Chamber of Commerce.

His political career began in 1996 when then New Democratic Party (NDP) Premier Piers McDonald was impressed with the way Fentie spoke and handled a raucous meeting. Fentie was seen as articulate and even-tempered. At that time, sitting Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) John Devries had decided not to seek re-election. As a consequence, McDonald recruited Fentie who won over 50% of the vote in 1996 and in subsequent elections. He served as House Leader. The NDP government fell to the Liberals of Pat Duncan in 2000. Not feeling at home in the NDP, Fentie crossed the floor to the Yukon Party in May 2002 and was elected leader of that party a month later. An early election was called in the fall of 2002, during which the territory had 9.8% unemployment and job creation was an issue. During the campaign Fentie admitted that he had been jailed briefly for drug trafficking. His candour probably blunted any attacks on his character. The campaign resulted in a victory for the Yukon Party with 12 of 18 seats, and at the end of November Fentie was sworn in as premier. He also served as finance minister, as other premiers tend to do, and as environment minister from 2006 to 2008. His style was finding a consensus and an open-door policy.

As premier he had a vision for the territory that centred on First Nations. He sought a funding formula with Ottawa and improvements to rural Yukon, health care, and economic development. He was a long-time champion of the Liard First Nation in his support of their quest for more logging allocations and recognised First Nations as full partners with a role in decisions regarding resources and natural gas pipelines. A result of his efforts was that 11 of 14 First Nation groups signed the Comprehensive Land Claims Agreement. His support of the Yukon First Nations continued in a 2011 agreement with the Minister of Northern Affairs and Northern Development, John Duncan, and the Teslin-Tlingit Council Chief Executive Officer, Pete Johnston. Through the agreement, the council was recognized as an administrator of justice with the ability to appoint enforcement officers to impose penalties for violations of council legislation and to establish a peace maker to adjudicate violations. Areas of jurisdiction involved adoptions, marriages, inheritance, management and control of settlement lands, natural resources, hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering, protection of fish and wildlife,



Premier Dennis Fentie.

and planning and zoning. Other supportive action included the Yukon Forum in which the government would meet First Nations leaders four times a year, an arrangement Fentie suggested could be a model for other governments. He also promoted the Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre and the Champagne Cultural Centre.

Another important achievement dealt with the federal funding formula for health care. In 2003 the federal government proposed a formula that Fentie and his other territorial colleagues objected to and ultimately refused to accept, noting that the northern territories were disadvantaged because the formula did not take into account the cost of service delivery for scattered populations. The outcome was an agreement that the territories would receive greater funding. As MLA for Watson Lake, Fentie was aware of issues of health care, especially in rural areas. His efforts led to the creation of hospitals in Watson Lake and Dawson City. In addition, the territory established the Yukon Substance Abuse Action Plan. His rural roots motivated him to lead in the creation of the Safe Communities and Neighbourhoods Act and a Royal Canadian Mounted Police Street Crime Reduction team. By continuing work started under the Duncan government, Fentie's government further

expanded the power of territorial governments in 2003 by achieving control of land resources.

Concern about the environment also characterised the Fentie government. In 2003 his government provided funding and support to save the Yukon Game Farm (now Yukon Wildlife Preserve), and although he was no longer environment minister, in 2009 he was instrumental in the establishment of the Climate Change Research Centre of Excellence. In addition, a Climate Change Action Plan emerged and he pressed for research into greenhouse gases.

Above all, the issue of the Yukon economy occupied the Fentie administration. Fentie outlined his views in speeches to the Empire Club in 2005 and to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in 2006. Among the proposals he supported were major projects, drawing parallels to the important roles played in territorial development by the Klondike gold rush, the White Pass and Yukon Railways, and the Alaska Highway. All these developments helped build the North and so too he argued, would the Alaska Highway Natural Gas Pipeline by transporting British Columbia and Yukon gas. The pipeline would pass through a corridor where 80% of the population lived and would increase First Nations employment opportunities not just in construction, but in involvement with oil and gas development. He regretted however that the federal government had not provided the territory with assistance to help people prepare for construction. With Alaska Governor Murkowski, Fentie signed an intergovernmental accord to work cooperatively. Foremost was the concept of an Alaska-Yukon Railway which he compared to the Alaska Highway. He indicated that a railway was technically feasible and would increase freight transport.

In 2010 along with the federal minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, Chuck Strahl (whose government committed a quarter of the funds), and the Yukon Community Services Minister, Archie Lang, Fentie announced an agreement to provide wastewater facilities in places including Haines Junction, Pelly Crossing, and Whitehorse as well as for regional community airports and roads.

The Canada Winter Games of 2007 are part of Fentie's lasting legacy. Not only did he support the bid for the games, but he promoted the idea of building athletic residences at Yukon College. As a result, the games provided a lasting valuable contribution to the community, according to a long-time colleague.

Towards the end of his term as premier, he encountered criticism. In 2006 when his government was reduced to a minority with the loss of three members, he achieved re-election. In the summer of 2010, it emerged that he was contemplating selling the publicly owned utility Yukon Energy to privately owned ATCO's Yukon Electric. There was no public announcement about the possibility until it was leaked. Brad Cathers, cabinet minister and MLA for Lake Laberge, resigned in protest and left the Yukon Party, accusing Fentie of lying to the public. The incident led an influential former MLA in the party to press for a leadership

review towards removing the premier. At a raucous meeting Fentie confronted the rebels and denied that he had lied, but took full responsibility and offered a humble apology. In his speech he surprised a number of people by offering to trigger a leadership debate in early 2011. While a secret ballot defeated the motion for a review, with continued unrest and Cathers remaining as an independent, in April 2011 Fentie announced he would be stepping down and not seeking re-election.

In his retirement from public life, Fentie took a number of positions in the private sector including as a director of Golden Predator Mining Corporation to which he brought wisdom and enthusiasm until his resignation a few weeks before he died. His withdrawal from public service allowed him more time to cook ribs, play bridge, ride his motorcycle, drive his motorboat and above all to be with his family full time.

On news of his death a number of tributes were made. Kwanlin Dün Chief Doris Bill called him a very strong voice for the Yukon who had worked to ensure Yukon had a level of services equal to the rest of Canada. Premier Sandy Silver indicated that Fentie had an immeasurable impact on the territory, fighting to ensure rural communities were at the forefront of decision making. Former Premier Pat Duncan also commented on Fentie's strong advocacy for Yukon (in particular, Southeast Yukon) and thanked his family, especially spouse Lorraine Nixon, for "loaning him to public service." Federal Member of Parliament Larry Bagnell noted that they had worked collaboratively, rising above partisan interests. Another friend and colleague, Gordon Steele, expressed the view that Fentie was a skilled leader without being domineering, while former Premier Piers McDonald reflected on his steady hand and commitment. Elaine Taylor, deputy premier and successor as environment minister, spoke of his accomplishments, his innovation, collaboration with other parties, pragmatic response to disagreements, and ability to push collective boundaries. At his memorial service, he was praised for his "calm, plain-spoken approach," and his support of colleagues. Friend Archie Lang noted Fentie's love of combat in the legislature. His spouse indicated he was a true friend and a soul mate.

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