

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 100-18(2): PARTICIPANT FUNDING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENTS

March 2, 2016

MR. O'REILLY: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. It's my understanding that the Department of Lands now coordinates GNWT participation in environmental assessment. Since the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act came into force in 1998, participant funding has been made available for exactly three of the more than 70 environment assessments or impact reviews that have taken place. Can the Minister of Lands tell this House who is responsible for participant funding for environment assessments in the Northwest Territories? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Mahsi. Minister of Lands.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on the national scale participant funding is part of the overall federal environmental assessment regime in Canada, which also applies to the Inuvialuit Settlement region. The absence of participant funding in the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act is a long-standing issue. The GNWT takes the view that the Government of Canada is responsible for participant funding based on the fact that the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act remains federal legislation and Canada has retained key authorities, such as policy direction and appointment to boards on the basis the boards are funded by Canada. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The current federal government has realized the mistakes associated with excluding Canadians from pipeline project assessments and has announced changes in the way that citizens can be involved in such decisions in the future. Can the Minister of Lands tell this House what he is prepared to do to ensure NWT residents have access to the resources necessary to meaningfully participate in environmental assessments?

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: The GNWT continues to press the Government of Canada to address this issue. Officials from the Department of Lands raised the issue in early 2015 in a meeting with INAC senior officials. Obviously, the GNWT supports decision-making in the environmental assessment process but we will continue to work with our counterparts in Ottawa to see if there's ways that we can address the issue of participant funding.

MR. O'REILLY: I appreciate the Minister's response and his work with his earpiece as well, but the benefits of participant funding are well documented and they include building confidence in our environmental management system and creating buy-in for our residents while considering projects. I'm wondering if the Minister can just provide a little bit more information about what specifically the GNWT is prepared to do to push this issue with the federal government. I understand he mentioned letters that have been sent in the past, but is this something he'd be prepared to take up with the new Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: We recognize the value of having our NWT residents participate in a lot of these processes, and I will commit to the Member that I will continue to raise the issue with our federal counterpart. We are fairly new in devolution. The responsibilities we're taking over are fairly new. I will take up the cause and continue to raise that issue with Ottawa so people in the Northwest Territories are able to be funded to participate in some of the hearings.

MR. SPEAKER: Mahsi. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker, and I appreciate the response from the Minister and I'd be happy to work with him on this issue. I've got a little bit of experience in this area and would be happy to share that with him, though Canadians south of 60 degrees are entitled to participant funding through federal environmental assessment legislation. Here in the Northwest Territories there's the Interim Resource Management Assistance Program (IRMA) to build capacity in Aboriginal governments outside the areas covered by land rights agreements. This is a very helpful initiative, but can the Minister tell us whether the GNWT is prepared to enhance our resource management legislation with a real participant funding program that is actually legislated? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. ROBERT MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I will take the Member up on his offer to work with myself on advancing some of these issues, again recognizing the fact that we're early in devolution and we're trying to work our way through the process and make sure we have a very strong regulatory system in the Northwest Territories. If that means funding some of the participants to make their cases to the respective boards, then it's something that we will continue to work on. And again, I will take the Member up on his offer.