

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 148-18(3): MINISTERIAL MEETINGS – TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

FEBRUARY 22, 2018

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister responsible for Public Engagement and Transparency, and they are with regard to the public engagement and transparency portal website. There is some confusion or inconsistency in terms of how ministerial meetings are classified. While I believe that the registry is a good first step, the deficiencies I outlined in my Member's statement really limit the value of this work. First of all, is the Minister aware of inconsistencies in classifying the type of ministerial meetings, and is he prepared to work with Regular MLAs to make improvement? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister responsible for Public Engagement and Transparency.

HON. LOUIS SEBERT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have been reporting on all Ministers' meetings with outside parties since April 2015, and, prior to that, the Premier had previously published a report of all of his meetings with outside parties, going back to January 2014, so this registry has been in effect for some time. Of course, staff in each Minister's office is responsible for entering and verifying the information that is published. Now, the information that goes into that registry is the date of the meeting, name of organization, parties in attendance, lead Minister and other attending Ministers, and type of meetings. Now, the type of meetings seem to fall into two categories, those with interest groups and intergovernmental, which perhaps do not provide as much information as the Member opposite would like. Certainly, we would be willing to look at improvements to that system.

MR. O'REILLY: It is great to get such a positive response from the Minister. I am happy to chat with him when we have a little bit of down time around this. In terms of listing ministerial meetings, there is a column about who the meeting was held with. Sometimes names of individuals are mentioned; other times, an organization only. There seems to be room for improvement and better consistency. Is the Minister prepared to review this aspect of the meeting registry and work with Regular MLAs to improve the registry itself?

HON. LOUIS SEBERT: Yes. Prior to this afternoon, I did look through the registry, and I did notice that earlier on sometimes just individuals were listed or sometimes just organizations. I did notice of late that individuals and organizations were listed, and I think that is quite appropriate and proper.

MR. O'REILLY: Again, I would like to thank the Minister for agreeing to improve the registry, but the single most important thing is that there is a lack of any information on the purpose or content of the meetings. Obviously, some elements of confidentiality must be maintained, but simply giving a name under the heading "telephone call" does not provide much information on the nature of our Ministers' activities in this consensus

government. Will the Minister work with Regular MLAs to develop criteria for providing more informative listings that describe the general subjects of such meetings to promote greater transparency?

HON. LOUIS SEBERT: Certainly, I would be willing to discuss this with the Regular Members and bring their concerns to Cabinet. I am not certain what kind of improvements are being contemplated, whether it would place too much of a burden on staff to have a very lengthy description of what took place in the meetings. I suppose that would be possible, but that would impose, as I say, an additional burden on staff. I do agree, having really only two designations of interest group or intergovernmental should certainly be improved, but I would certainly be looking for suggestions from Members opposite as to how that category could be improved. Thank you.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister again. I heard the word "burden" mentioned several times, and that is not what I am interested in creating. I am interested in creating transparency. This government, though, has resisted calls for creation of a lobbyist registry. In the post-devolution NWT, there is a lot more at stake, of course. If we had such a registry, we would know whose interests are being represented and have a better idea why meetings are taking place. Will the Minister take transparency and accountability to the next level and work with Regular MLAs and the public to create a Northwest Territories lobbyist registry? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. LOUIS SEBERT: Having a formal lobbyist registry would require costs to enact new legislation, and we are a small jurisdiction. I have looked at other jurisdictions, and the other jurisdictions in the North do not have a lobbyist registry, nor does the province of Prince Edward Island. I think a formal registry would be overly cumbersome and unnecessary in our jurisdiction.

One of the questions that does occur to me about a lobbyist registry or a reporting registry that we already have, I have been looking at other jurisdictions and wondering why the Regular Members do not report. Thank you.