

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

**QUESTION 357-18(3):
COORDINATION OF PARENTAL LEAVE BENEFITS WITH THE FEDERAL
GOVERNMENT**

October 11, 2018

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I have some questions for the Minister of Education, Culture, and Employment following up on my constituency newsletter drop earlier this year. The federal government is improving parental benefits under its employment insurance program. Parents can share the 40 total weeks in various combinations, with a minimum of five weeks available for each parent, effective June 1, 2019. What is our government doing to coordinate NWT parental benefits available to our residents with this new federal initiative? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Education, Culture, and Employment.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are aware of the changes to the Canada Labour Code, and we are working diligently. Our employment standards acts usually mirror the Canadian act as well, so we're actually working at this moment to develop a plan to engage stakeholders around the changes that need to be made. We're looking at a couple of changes. Some of them are in the federal legislation, but some of them are our own, too. We're looking at leave provisions for parents, family, caregivers, and victims of domestic violence, but we're also looking for inclusion of domestic workers, for example, nannies and things. We're seeing an influx of that coming into the Northwest Territories. So we are expanding what we're doing, actually, into developing a more comprehensive workers' Employment Standards Act that meets the needs of the residents of the territories currently. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that response. I did give her a heads-up about these questions, and I appreciate that she's doing some work on the Employment Standards Act. That's one of the things that does need to change, to make sure that we're ready for this June 1, 2019 deadline. Can the Minister tell us whether it's the intention of our government to actually get those changes to the Employment Standards Act done in time to meet the federal employment insurance benefits changes that are to come into effect on June 1, 2019?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: We are working diligently to be as timely as possible. Like I said, we're doing a stakeholder engagement. That should be done by the end of this fiscal year. Then we're suspecting that we'll have a legislative proposal ready to be delivered to the standing committee early in 2019. So we are trying to get it done as soon as possible.

MR. O'REILLY: I appreciate that we are all working under some timelines here with this, but if we don't get an LP until early next year, I'm worried that this not going to happen in time for June 1, 2019, but I want to move on.

The last areas, as I understand, that may need some changes with regard to

coordination of our parental benefits with the new federal program changes will be in the area of collective agreements. Changes to collective agreements may also be needed to fully protect the position or job until an employee returns from parental leave. Can the Minister explain what steps our government is taking to change collective agreements in light of the new federal employment insurance changes in parental benefits?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: My understanding is that negotiations are currently under way. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to discuss them on the floor of this House at this moment.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President, and I thank the Minister for that. There are negotiations going on, but it takes two to tango, and I'm sure if our government were to come to the table and with an offer to deal with this even in advance of the overall package, that would probably be much appreciated.

I would like to know, though: how will the Minister and our government as a whole communicate these changes in parental benefits under our jurisdiction to the public? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: It's really important, actually, when we make changes to the Employment Standards Act that the public is notified of them. They impact everyone, workers and employers together. We are committed that we will do a full communications layout. We will be putting ads in the newspapers to engage employers, stakeholders in the consultation process. We will be posting it on our Facebook, on our website. Once the changes are made, if changes are made, then we will actually be doing the same again, posting them in the newspaper, trying to engage them as much as possible. I would appreciate if MLAs are willing to help as well by posting them on their sites as well. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.