

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 428-18(3): INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING PRIORITIES

October 23, 2018

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Infrastructure.

I fully understand that the federal government sets guidelines for its infrastructure programs. My concern is with the lack of transparency on what our government submits. Is there a general call put out to departments? It is just not clear to me.

Can the Minister explain how his department and Cabinet as a whole determines how and what projects are developed, reviewed, and approved for submission by this government for federal infrastructure funding? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Infrastructure.

HON. WALLY SCHUMANN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When infrastructure was putting forward our requests for federal dollars for the bilaterals we signed, along with all of the other sources of funding that we are trying to secure, the first thing we did is we checked the mandate. That is the first thing we have done. We checked the mandate and identified the priorities that were within the mandate. We have looked at the 20-year capital-needs assessment and the annual capital-planning process.

That is the process, we have done that, and then, when we do that, we also have to look at the alignment of objectives and outcomes that the federal government has laid out, the eligibility criteria that they establish for this federal funding. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. It sounds like the mandate, the 20-year capital plan, is driving what we submit, but I had hoped to hear that there were some other kinds of rigorous analyses around the number of jobs that would be created, greenhouse gas reductions, regional distribution, and a balance between physical and social infrastructure. If the Minister has these criteria that he and his Cabinet colleagues use internally, can he share those with this side of the House?

HON. WALLY SCHUMANN: I can certainly check with the department for exactly what we used and share that with the Member.

MR. O'REILLY: I would like to thank the Minister for that commitment. As I said, I hoped that the criteria would include things like the number of jobs likely to be created, greenhouse gas reductions, regional distribution, and balance between physical and social infrastructure.

The Minister has committed to share whatever criteria he has developed with our side of the House. How does he intend to share those criteria with the public?

HON. WALLY SCHUMANN: I will have to check with the department to see exactly how we could do that, and I can certainly get back to the Member.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. A few commitments out of the Minister here today. I appreciate that.

I talked earlier today about how, on the Infrastructure Canada website, it shows that 79 per cent of our federal infrastructure dollars since 2002 have been spent on roads and highways. This has led to a big imbalance. I have referred to this as the "big toys for big boys" approach.

Can the Minister explain this imbalance and how he will work to ensure that more social infrastructure projects make it through Cabinet's processes and into GNWT submissions for federal infrastructure funding? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. WALLY SCHUMANN: You know, we have had a lot of discussions in this House about where infrastructure money should go, and a lot of people believe that it should go to education, health, and housing infrastructure.

When we go down to these meetings with our federal colleagues and provincial and territorial colleagues, the criteria is clearly laid out. The federal government has said that our bilaterals are for green infrastructure; public transit; social infrastructure, which is community, culture, and recreational bilateral; rural northern communities; and Arctic Energy Fund. That is the criteria that I have to work with.

When my fellow colleagues go down, they have to lobby for their own pots of money, be it health, the ones I just laid out, and there are federal engagements on those, and they have their own pots of money.

A lot of people, and particularly this Member, thinks that there is a lot of money in this program for social infrastructure, and there isn't. The criteria is clearly laid out by the federal government. We had to line up, as I said, our mandate, our 20-year capital needs, the priorities of this Legislative Assembly, and work with the criteria the federal government gives us to try to access these dollars.

Now, I'm not saying that we don't go down there and argue for some stuff. We are continually down there trying to fight for every dollar we can get, and, thankfully to Minister Sohi when we signed our bilateral, between myself and the finance minister, he clearly listened to us that we don't want it on a per capita basis. We want it base-funding plus, and he did that. We got more money than the Yukon, Nunavut, and PEI. We did very well on our bilaterals, but there seems to be this notion that we can just take these pots of money, there's \$570 million, and spread it around the Northwest Territories where we want, and we can't. That's not how this program works. We have to work within what they have laid out, and we will continue to do that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.