

MEMBER'S STATEMENT — KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE
STUDENT LOAN REMISSION PUBLIC REPORTING

March 11, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. For years, now, the GNWT Public Accounts published the names of NWT students who have received remission of their student loans. The schedule contains the individual students' names and the amount of each remission.

Since the review of the 2014-2015 public accounts, the Standing Committee on Government Operations has recommended that the Department of Finance stop this practice. This information used to be published in a Schedule of Bad Debt Write-offs, Forgiveness and Student Loan Remissions.

The Information and Privacy Commissioner questioned this disclosure of personal information in correspondence with the Department of Finance that was tabled in the last Assembly and said: "Is it necessary for the program and/or for public accountability for students to be required to give up their financial privacy to take advantage of a program designed, by its very terms, to accommodate the forgiveness of debt in certain circumstances?"

Finance undertook an internal privacy impact assessment that did not seek outside views or assistance. The Information and Privacy Commissioner was not consulted, despite committee's requests. Finance separated student loan remissions into its own schedule beginning in 2018 but continues to publish individual names and amounts. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment now requires students to agree to have their identities and loan remission amounts published as a condition of getting such loan remissions; hardly free, prior, or informed consent, Mr. Speaker.

I sought advice from the Legislative Assembly's law clerk on this matter. The clerk found that there is no legal basis to continue to disclose the identities of students getting loan remissions and the corresponding individual amounts.

I believe strongly that the Department of Finance is subjecting NWT students to an inappropriate level of disclosure that is inconsistent with standards applied elsewhere in government. I intend to continue to press Cabinet to modify this practice as soon as possible. Mr. Speaker, I do want to recognize that there is a new collaborative spirit and approach from the current Cabinet, and I have been pleased to work with them on this issue. I will have questions later today for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.