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Committee of the Whole—Response to the 2019-2023 Mandate of the GNWT
February 12, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Madame la Presidente. As I stated on December 11, 2019 in this House, I have a number of concerns with the priorities that were developed by the MLAs. We produced a list of 22 priorities versus the 25 in the 18th Assembly. Hard choices were not made amongst big infrastructure projects or even between those projects and investments in social spending that should include housing, polytechnic university, universal childcare, and guaranteed basic income.

I do not support some of the priorities developed by this Assembly. I will put people first over infrastructure. Some priorities work at cross-purposes with each other, such as increasing economic diversification or trying to increase mineral exploration. Other priorities are extremely vague: reduce core housing needs or advance universal childcare. The priorities provide very little direction for the work of some of the departments, agencies, and Ministers. I look forward to an opportunity to review the mandate letters as soon as they are available and well before they are formally issued by the Premier.

On to the mandate tabled late last week by the Premier, I want to firstly acknowledge the good efforts on the part of the Premier to work collaboratively with Regular MLAs in developing the mandate. We spent over two full days in direct discussion with the Premier, which is an unprecedented and welcome change from the last Assembly. We had intense discussions. Sometimes we agreed to disagree, but I think the results clearly show the influence of the Regular MLAs in shaping the mandate.

I had pushed for a structured approach to each of the priorities. I suggested clear timelines, measurable targets or outcomes, steps necessary to reach the targets or outcomes, and accountability for the proposed actions and coordination of them. I think this was largely achieved with the mandate that's before us. However, many of the outcomes or targets are very low. For example, increasing our housing stock by 100 units over four years is only about a 4-percent increase and will likely not even keep pace with our growing waiting list of residents wishing to get into public housing. As another example, there are supposed to be about, I think, 16 active negotiation tables for land rights and implementation of existing agreements. The mandate sets a very low target of two agreements to be concluded at the end of four years. I sincerely hope that these are the agreements that cover the Dehcho and Akaitcho territories, but surely we can do better than two agreements.

The mandate also contains vague commitments in some cases. These include words such as "advance," "working with," "increase opportunities," and similar words. Voters elected us for real change. That needs to start with a bold vision and goals. I think the mandate can and should have adopted clear commitments to this type of change, with more ambitious targets, outcomes, and deliverables.

I have a number of concerns with some of the actions proposed to fill different parts of the mandate and would like to highlight some of those now. The climate change sections are particularly weak, with few specific actions or outcomes to establish internal leadership, accountability, and improved decision-making. The infrastructure section is silent on whether and how we can possibly afford all of these projects at the same time. There is nothing about changing our messaging about the NWT being a great place to live, work, and do business to attract investment, instead of the tired old complaints about our regulatory system, that scares away investment. The roles of the Northwest Territories Power Corporation in our energy future is not even discussed, and the focus is on large energy projects that will do little to build energy self-sufficiency and lower the cost of living. The education section is rather lean, and there is no clear commitment to universal childcare. Clear targets should have been developed for food security, in my view.

In closing, I would like to thank the Premier, though, for working with the Regular MLAs and delivering a much-improved version of this mandate, and I'll have further comments and questions as we work our way through the document. Mahsi, Madam Chair.