

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE
QUESTION 233-19(2): LESSONS LEARNED TO DATE – COVID-19

May 26, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, monsieur le President. My questions are for the Premier, who is coordinating the GNWT's pandemic planning and recovery. My statement earlier today reflected on some of the lessons learned to date. I recognize that we are still in the midst of the pandemic, but we must have learned some lessons and best practices by now. Has the Premier begun to plan for a thorough and public review of GNWT's pandemic planning and response, and what sorts of specific measures or steps can we expect to see? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Honourable Premier.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Looking for a plan of our response for COVID-19, absolutely, we are looking at it. However, I do want to be careful with that, because COVID-19 is still here. We are still experiencing things at a rapid rate. It has slowed down a bit, but, by the second wave, we are expecting that changes will come pretty rapidly.

We have been in the process now of changing our services, providing services that we needed and programs that we needed to accompany people, but some other things will need to be done. For example, the municipal and community government, EMO is the one that stands in my head, the most prominent at this point. EMO, the emergency management organization, was meant to be a program for community programs, community issues, floods, forest fires, et cetera. This pandemic made it worldwide, and so, at that point, it became more of a Cabinet decision.

Those are things that, going into the future, will probably be a legislation that I would want changed in this Assembly. At this point, we are still in the middle of it. We have only just begun it. It would be inappropriate at this time to go looking at changing legislation right now, recognizing that Cabinet already has control of it, but it will be something that we need to do in this Assembly. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Premier for that. I think that I almost heard her say that she is willing to look at the Emergency Measures Act. That's a good thing. I have lots of other ideas. I am sure that the Chief Public Health Officer is going to conduct some kind of review, as well, but the review needs to be done in a public fashion. Maybe the Auditor General can give us some ideas, as well.

I want to move on, Mr. Speaker. As MLAs, we collectively developed a set of priorities, and then Cabinet went off and developed a mandate that was tabled and discussed in the House. Would the Premier agree that, given the pandemic, it is time to review and update those priorities and the mandate?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: A couple of months ago, when COVID-19 hit us, it was early March. Towards late March, I started to realize that life was changing really quickly. We were having to supplement areas that we had never put money in before; programs were closing up; offices were closing up; we were looking at a new way of doing business. It made me wonder, Mr. Speaker. We spent months going over the mandate, making it based on the priorities, and I started to wonder, "Do we have the money? Is it still the priority?"

I gave direction, actually, at the end of March for the departments to start looking at the mandate and actually looking at what they can do. I am not going to give too much right here, because it is process, and I do believe that it's important to work with Regular MLAs. We have put an offer in to standing committee, my understanding is, and so, at that point, we would like to be able to talk to the Members to review where we are with the mandate and if we need any changes, because, in an initial review on our side, it looks like a lot of the mandate can still be done.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Premier for that. I agree that it is time to review the mandate. Probably, you need to collectively look at the priorities we developed. I want to say that GNWT's economic assistance programs to small businesses have been very slow and uneven. I am going to have a lot more to say about that, but I want to ask the Premier about overall planning for economic recovery. We have had an initial presentation without specifics, but can the Premier tell us now how the views of Regular MLAs are going to be incorporated, and when does she anticipate this effort really starting to take off?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Again, most people, when they talk about COVID-19, people have seen the economic impacts and people across the world, across Canada have been talking about economic recovery. I think we are one of the only jurisdictions that is talking about economic and social recovery. Perhaps because we are a small population, we had the benefit of actually seeing what we could do in a short amount of time. So I think that involving MLAs was a commitment that we made at the beginning of this session. It has been long. It does take a lot more time, but I made a commitment that it would not be Cabinet plus three, and I will maintain that commitment, which means that, as we work forward, when we develop our economic and social recovery plan, we have proposed to Members that we have a joint committee that is made up of Cabinet and the Regular Members so that the Regular Members are actively engaged, not just giving information, but actually engaged in the process of defining what our future will be.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Honourable Premier. Final supplementary, Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Premier. I do believe that she is committed to an inclusive process. Clearly, there have been some success stories during this pandemic, and I mentioned some of those in my statement. We have got social programs that are starting to deal with homelessness. We have got a managed alcohol program, wage subsidy for low-income workers, payrolling of Income Assistance and more. Can the Premier share her

thoughts about how we can keep these significant gains and how we can continue to plan for economic recovery at the same time? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Those who were here in the last Assembly would remember one time I had been asked in the House about where I stood. I said people have called me many names, but they haven't called me a name, but people have called me at times a socialist. I don't think I am really that radical, but people have said that. I am all about universal childcare and guaranteed living wage. I think it is part of the answer. I do not believe the perception that people will just sit back and be lazy. I think that would tire people very quickly. I have already started to put the fuel in the fire.

As I meet with our Premiers across Canada, with our Prime Minister, I have already been saying to them things such as, "You've given the wage increase. You are giving these out to people. How can you ask us to take it back?" So I think that that is really important. It is a matter of not only what we do as a government, what the federal government does. I have been working very closely with our three territories on both sides, and we are looking at providing a win-win to the federal government. These programs, getting people in housing, giving people almost a guaranteed wage, giving people more access to childcare are all things that all of us in this House should be proud of. It would be a sin, Mr. Speaker, to take them back. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.