

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 355-19(2): CONTAMINATED SITES

October 16, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Premier, who is responsible for federal relations. In my statement earlier today, I noted the potential for literally billions of dollars of federal investment across the northern territories as part of an accelerated program on contaminated-site remediation and economic recovery. It's not clear that my call for action was taken seriously in May. Does the Premier see this as a major opportunity for federal funding transfers? If so, tell us who is actually in charge of this work and how it's going to be coordinated across several departments. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: [Microphone turned off] ...department, which would be the Minister of ITI. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Okay. Minister of Industry, Tourism and Investment.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is certainly a priority that has been made very clear to me. I am happy to give some further update as to what has happened in the intervening months. There was a conference with the energy and mining ministers of Canada, at which some of the national-level work that is occurring was discussed and an awareness that, given the funding that is now on the table from the federal government, there may be some shift in those priorities or reorganizing of those priorities. What we are doing here is a response to that, and seeing that that was out there, I immediately sought to have a conversation with the three territorial Ministers and did so approximately two weeks ago.

I did so in preparation for a call that the three territorial Ministers were having with Minister O'Regan just yesterday, I think -- my time sense is getting a bit off, Mr. Speaker -- but this week. I had that call with Minister O'Regan. The call with the three territorial Ministers spoke about this issue. It affects the Yukon and here, but the Nunavut Minister, as well, was engaged. In our call with Minister O'Regan, we raised this issue. I had also had my own call with Minister O'Regan where, again, I raised this issue. Mr. Speaker, I also sent a letter to Minister O'Regan just a couple days ago, on October 14th, focused entirely on exactly this issue, on how the Northwest Territories is going to have access to this stream of funding, how we are going to participate in this area of the stimulus.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that update. In the joint letter that I saw on a pan-territorial approach, the issue of an accelerated contaminated sites program was buried on page 3, and it was really dressed up as support for the mining industry. I am worried that GNWT will simply see this federal support as a way to lessen the public liability we failed to prevent from a bankruptcy of Strategic Oil and Gas, Cameron Hills, and similar boondoggles. What assurance can the Premier give me that there is a real

vision and concrete proposal for an accelerated northern contaminated sites remediation program with federal investment?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: There certainly is a vision for this project. We do recognize, most certainly, that typical well abandonment in the southern provinces costs far less than what well abandonment and reclamation will cost here in the Northwest Territories or in the North more generally. Whether that is particularly because of access and the need to transport supplies, there is also significant environmental risk here, again, with climate change being on the front lines of the Northwest Territories. There is real, clear awareness that this is an area where we need to pay significant attention. In addition to that, we are also certainly well aware that there are a lot of coming opportunities for remediation economics here in the Northwest Territories, and if we can have access to the stimulus funding now, that will help ensure that people are being trained and given experience with more experienced reclamation companies so that they are ready to take on those opportunities as they go forward.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. It leads very nicely into my next question. In my statement, I referenced that literally billions of dollars are going to be spent on remediation at sites like Giant Mine, Norman Wells, and across the Northwest Territories, and I think that there are some enormous opportunities here to build a remediation economy that includes training, apprenticeships, research, and more. All of that, of course, should be linked to the polytechnic university. Can the Premier tell us whether our government has made that link between federal investment in an accelerated contaminated sites program and the polytechnic university?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: I am happy to say that, yes, we have made that link. I think the Premier was prepared to take the question, Mr. Speaker, but it's because there is an overarching direction that is going on on this. I've had the opportunity to speak very briefly with my colleague Minister Simpson from ECE, and I believe it's out in the public and well-known already that our resources and environmental management is one of the pillars of the polytechnic going forward. Certainly, the fact that there is that link that has been made between ITI, where we can provide those opportunities in the industry; ECE, where they can provide opportunities in training; and, of course, then with federal engagement, if we can have access to this opportunity. All of those links are now, I believe, quite actively being made.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. I, too, provided my own links and comments back to the Minister in terms of those areas of specialization for the polytechnic university. I guess what I want to speak about now is really that we still have a long way to go as a government to prevent further public environmental liabilities. We, of course, want to make sure that the polluter-pays principle is honoured and that current users do not use an accelerated contaminated sites program to subsidize or replace their own obligations. Can the Premier provide any assurance that our government will finally take action to prevent further public environmental liabilities and fully implement the polluter-pays principle for federal investment in an accelerated contaminated sites program? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Again, this is an opportunity to demonstrate the whole-of-government approach. The polluter-pays principle is certainly a foundation of the modern environmental assessment and regulatory regime that we have here in the Northwest Territories, and that is something that ITI, in terms of our involvement within our resource sector, is aware of and something in which the department of Finance is also involved, in terms of constantly monitoring those who are providing securities. Of course, it is the Departments of Environment and Natural Resources and Lands who work closely to determine an accurate amount of liability to ensure that, in fact, the GNWT would be protected against the need for remediation liabilities, should that fact arise, and that the companies that are performing their work here are adhering to all of those requirements, again, with that foundation simply being that the polluter would pay. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.