

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 500-19(2): GOVERNMENT RENEWAL INITIATIVE

February 4, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My question is for the Minister of. Back in October, the Minister announced the Government Renewal Initiative, but it was a little bit lean on details. Can the Minister provide any more details now on the steps, stages or phases of the Government Renewal Initiative, how Regular MLAs will be involved, and how it is going to be communicated to our workforce and the general public? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Finance.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: Mr. Speaker, I actually love talking about government renewal, but I'll try not to take the full ten minutes. We're starting out right now with the Department of ECE and Department of Finance. The government renewal process takes two steps. I should start by mentioning that all departments have been involved quite extensively in terms of looking at government renewal and looking at the program evaluation process in understanding how it's going to unfold. This has certainly been a government-wide process, government-wide initiative, and one that I think has already been well-communicated within government departments, and materials have already gone to committee. I'm happy to do a detailed briefing with committee and provide even further information to them.

I can say that, when a department goes through the process that is envisioned as of right now, that we're looking at two parts. The first part is to gather the information about the programs, do an inventory of what programs are there, and to then go through an evaluation system of those programs. There will be involvement from frontline workers. That is critical that the frontline workers be involved. They are often the ones that understand where the efficiencies lie and what the value to the residents has been. There's quite a bit that I could unpack within all that, Mr. Speaker. I will leave it at that, and see if there is, perhaps, another follow-up that could guide what direction or what further information the Member is looking for at this time. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for the Minister's statement in response to my question. Look, I want to be generous here. The Minister has shared information with us as Regular MLAs. My questions here today are to try to get this out into the public because nobody really knows what is going on. Can the Minister tell us: She just mentioned that Finance and I believe Education, Culture and Employment are the first two departments that are going to be up for review. Is there a full schedule that she could provide to, perhaps, table in the House so that the public and our workforce knows what's going on?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: I can certainly provide the expected schedule of having two departments go through the process over time, and we're looking in general

to maintain one larger department and one smaller department going through the process. The reason for that is: Essentially, it's internal capacity. The certified evaluators that we have, the financial analysts that we have, and individual departments, it is quite a lot of work for them, and we're trying to do this by funding internally as much as possible using different types of techniques. Trying to manage doing it quickly, but still doing it in a way that we can, again, not overburden departments as we go through. Yes, ECE and Finance are the first two up, if you will, and we're expecting this to take somewhere between three and four years to cover all 11 departments. I can provide how we expect that to go for each of the two parts for two sets of departments over time. I'll be happy to provide that.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that, and I look forward to seeing that document tabled in the House soon. Just in case anyone's interested, I do believe in a program, a strong program evaluation, but I'm just not sure the Government Renewal Initiative is the right way to go about this. I'm also worried that short-term savings will eclipse long-term benefits, and that the differential impacts of changes on disadvantaged populations will not be adequately considered. What assurance can the Minister provide that the Government Renewal Initiative will adequately consider the long-term and differential impacts of changes to programs and services?

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: I can't say enough: This isn't simply a reduction exercise. By going about this in a way that is methodical and that relies on evaluation rather than just cherry-picking or targeting from somewhere within senior ranks of what programs or services we think might not provide value, that is not the way to make an evidence-based decision about good government value. That is exactly why we want to go department by department, why we want to actually look and do that inventory as to what is, in fact, being offered and then involve the frontline workers to ensure that we understand the true value and benefit of all the individual programs and services that we offer. This is a way to be, in fact, evidence-based when we're making decisions, and not just say that we're evidence-based. We're going to go out and actually gather the evidence that shows the government what we do, what we do well, and where we have duplication.

This is actually a chance to plug one other thing that matters deeply to me, and that's the GBA plus, gender-based analysis plus approach to making decisions within the government. You will recall that I had said that all decisions are now going to be analyzed with that lens of GBA plus, which looks not only at gender but all identity factors. Although we have that now, it's happening, it is working its way through, I still think there is a lot that can be done there. As we go through this process, that lens can continue to be brought forward. I am confident in saying that we're going to be looking at how government renewal, how the programs and services we offer are impacting different people in different ways, and doing so, as I've said, I believe, in the budget speech, so that we are more equitable across the Northwest Territories.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for her passion today. I'm worried, though, that a lot of time and effort is going to go into this Government Renewal Initiative and it will not deliver the results we need to have our

government going off a fiscal cliff. I think that's being driven by overspending on large infrastructure projects. We need to make some tough decisions and choices now because we can't possibly accomplish all the items in Cabinet's mandate. What assurance can the Minister give me today that the results of the Government Renewal Initiative are going to be delivered on time rather than making tough decisions right now? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE WAWZONEK: We have to. I'm inclined to sit down. I suspect that that, in response, won't be satisfactory to my colleague across the floor. We have to get this right, and we make tough decisions all the time.

Today, we tabled a \$2 billion budget. In order to make tough decisions, it is better, in my view, to do that based on evidence and to do that based on evidence that is gathered methodically and to do that in a way that is based on evidence that looks at programs and services across the Northwest Territories with a vision of value. We want to have value and not just -- it needs to be methodical and evaluative. That, Mr. Speaker, is really at the core of what the Government Renewal Initiative will be.

The first two departments that go through, Finance and ECE, should have those processes complete in time to see impacts on the business planning that goes through for the next budget cycle. That, then, will allow everyone to see that we can, in fact, be making tough decisions. It will, in fact, demonstrate where those decision points may lie. The tough decisions happen all the way through. I mean, budgeting is a process that I've said many times is cyclical. It takes all year. In fact, I suspect the folks over in Finance are going to be starting on the 2022-2023 budget very soon.

Tough decisions have to happen continually. We can't wait until the future, but we also can't put all the eggs in the basket and say that it's all because of the infrastructure plan and the infrastructure projects. If we don't have infrastructure, we don't have health or education or corridors for communications or trans-border energy. It is not one thing that is driving the challenges that we have financially or fiscally; it is all the things. On budget day, this is my chance to give one more mini budget address, I suppose. We have to do all the things, and we have to make those choices. We're going to do it with evidence, and we're going to do it with evaluation. That's our way forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.