

## ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

### QUESTION 510-19(2): UNIVERSAL CHILDCARE

February 5, 2021

**MR. O'REILLY:** Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to follow up on my colleague from Kam Lake's questions about universal childcare, so I have some questions for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. I know that he is good at thinking fast on his feet. We already know what the costs are for setting up universal childcare from a 2014 study done by people at the University of Toronto. I am looking at the study right now, Mr. Speaker. Back then, it was predicted that it would be \$20 million a year to fund universal childcare across the NWT, the same level as Quebec, and \$45 million a year if we were to do the same as Scandinavian countries. As a first step, would be the Minister be prepared to have this report updated so that we have an idea as to the true cost of implementing universal childcare in the Northwest Territories? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Education, Culture and Employment.

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are developing a strategy to advance toward universal childcare, and one of the things we have to do is figure out what we want to do and how much that would cost. There are different options, right now, for what universal childcare would cost. Do we stick with what we have now? Does the government play a larger role in terms of providing care, perhaps where there is no care? There are a lot of things, and so, while the paper was a good start, it doesn't cover all the different models. The numbers that the Member is looking for, we're working on all of those and we'll have those sometime. I can find out the timeline and be more precise with this, but the Member can be assured that we're doing this work. Thank you.

**MR. O'REILLY:** I want to thank the Minister for that commitment. Look, the work was already done in 2014. You can probably go back and ask them to refresh it. I think part of the problem here is that our government has not identified universal childcare as a high priority. We've got something as vague as advancing it in our mandate and in the priorities that we developed. This needs to be a much higher priority with us when we go to the federal government. We shouldn't be asking for \$800 million for a Slave Geographical Province Road. What we should be doing is asking for 40 years of funding for universal childcare. Will this Minister commit to placing universal childcare at a high level when he goes to Ottawa, and the whole Cabinet? This needs to be a high priority when we go to Ottawa. He has a meeting next week, or this week, with the federal Minister responsible. Will he commit to making sure that this is a high priority for this government moving forward?

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** It's a high priority for me. I told the federal Minister sometimes it may be difficult to figure out where we lie as a government, given that you can't just say we're this party or that party and you can basically understand our platform. That's why I

told him, "Let me assure you that we are fully committed to advancing universal childcare and it is a high priority." That work is already done.

**MR. O'REILLY:** I appreciate the response from the Minister, but if you go to the federal government, you need to have an ask. You need to have a plan moving forward, a costed plan. I keep pushing my colleagues on the other side: When you go to the federal government, you have to have a specific ask. You have to have your act together. You have to have the money identified as to how to roll it out. We don't have that for universal childcare. It's something I pushed in the last Assembly, and I'm going to continue to push it in this Assembly. If the Minister is going to talk to the federal Minister responsible, you need to have a document, and you need to have the ask prepared. Can the Minister commit to get that ready in the next two months?

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** I want to assure the Member that everything he is saying is what we're doing. This is actually what we're working on. I wish I had a product I could pull out of my back pocket right now, but I don't. There have been endless reports on early learning, universal childcare, childcare needs across the territory. There has been engagement with childcare providers. There has been a lot of work done. Right now, the department is looking at all of that work, putting it all together, taking what they know from their interactions with early learning and childcare providers, putting it together with what we know from research from around the world in terms of early learning and childcare, and then coming up with a plan. We are going to have asks for the federal government. There is no doubt about it. I don't have a timeline, again. This isn't something I want to rush, so I can't say two months. I will let the Member know what sort of timeline we're working on.

**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 that. You might detect a little bit of frustration on my part. I was here the last Assembly. We identified universal childcare as a priority in that Assembly. It was even in the mandate to do it and to prepare a costed plan, but Cabinet wouldn't do it. At midterm review, the majority of MLAs -- I was not onside with this -- changed the priorities, changed the mandate so that we wouldn't even get a costed plan. If we had done the work back then, we would have been ready with a specific ask.

I know that the Minister is talking to the federal government about this. This is great. I hope he is talking to the other parties, as well. We are going to be heading into a federal election probably within the next six months, and we need to have that ask ready. You need to work with the other parties. Is the Minister working with the other opposition parties to make sure that it's clear what our asks are with regard to universal childcare? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** I am not personally working with the opposition party, the critic or whoever that might be. However, our Premier is. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.