

**KEVIN O'REILLY—MLA FRAME LAKE**  
**Rights Agreement Negotiations and Implementation**  
**Committee of the Whole—2018-2019 Operating Budget Review**  
**Dept. of Executive and Indigenous Affairs—February 12, 2021**

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks, Madam Chair. There are three areas I'd like to question on page 126. Maybe I'll start with the lines around implementation, intergovernmental relations, and negotiations. There is no increase in any of those lines. You know, I was in the 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly. The candidate who eventually became the Premier promised that all of the ongoing negotiations were going to be completed in the four years. Do you know how many agreements we actually reached in four years? One. It was an agreement in principle for self-government in Norman Wells, for the Metis local there. One agreement in four years. Madam Chair, I don't want to be back in that position at the end of this Assembly, and I continually hear from negotiators, people involved in the negotiations with Indigenous governments, that the problem now at the table is GNWT. It's not the federal government anymore. They are a minor player, for the most part. The problem is our government. That's really not a great place to be, to start with.

I know that we have a new Cabinet and they promised new things, but there is nothing to deliver on that promise in this budget, no additional resources. Anyway, my question for the Minister here is: do the negotiators at any of these tables have new mandates that have been developed by this Cabinet to try to move this forward, and why is there no new money in here to try to help move these negotiations along? Thanks, Madam Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler):** Thank you, Member. Madam Premier.

**HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE:** Thank you, Madam Chair. At the beginning of this Assembly, we did have a presentation to the Executive on the negotiations. They do have mandates. They know exactly what. As stated yesterday, Madam Chair, the difficulty is that, when it becomes too financial, monies et cetera, they need to actually come back to the executive for approval. The negotiators are not executive. They do not have that authority to make excessive decisions without a Cabinet approval. That is a common process. In the last government, they said that they would all be done; probably not the best commitment to make on the floor. We never committed to that.

Why is there no new money? We have spent the last year and a bit that we have been in the government actually working on those relationships. Again, because of COVID-19, it has allowed me to actually meet more regularly with Indigenous governments. We have built relationships. We have had governments come to us that had said they were not going to work with us, and, because of the relationships that we have formed over this new government, they are coming back to the table. So I do have hope that, within this government, I am not naive enough to say that we will have them all done, but you will see progress within this government. If we need extra money because of that, then I will go back to the executive and ask for supplementary funding. However, at this point, Madam Chair, I do not see that we need it. I think that the negotiations are going fairly well, considering the detail and the difficulties with negotiations. Thank you, Madam Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler):** Thank you. Member for Frame Lake.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks, Madam Chair. Look, I am happy to work with the Premier and this Cabinet on this, but I am going to narrow my question right down. Have new mandates been provided to any of the negotiators since this Cabinet came in, yes or no? Thank you, Madam Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler):** Thank you, Member. Madam Premier.

**HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE:** Thank you, Madam Chair. It's difficult to say, and I would like to say yes or no. I hear the Member wants that, but it's difficult to say exactly what the mandates were before. I never was privy to that. What they have is there are three areas of negotiations that they have, and, like I said, in those areas, it's a trilateral negotiation. It's the federal government, the Indigenous governments, and ourselves; land quantum, royalties, and cash. When those issues come, when they are about to sign, they come back to Cabinet, and they ask what we are doing, and then we give direction with that. At this point, Madam Chair, I know I hear people saying they do not have the mandate and stuff, but I am not exactly a hundred percent sure what they are talking about. At this point, like I said, there is nothing that specifies that "thou shalt do this," but I will look further into it. Thank you, Madam Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler):** Thank you, Madam Premier. Member for Frame Lake.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks, Madam Chair. I am not going to belabour this because my time is getting burned up here, but, if the Minister does not know whether the negotiators have actually had their mandates changed in any way since the new Cabinet has come in, we have got a real problem here, Houston. If those negotiators have not received new mandates or direction from this Cabinet and we are a third of the way through our term, I am seriously worried. I am going to leave it at that, Madam Chair, for this area, but I want to move on to my next one. That is a little bit of a warning that, if we are a third of the way through and we have not given new mandates, I do not know where we are going.

I want to turn to the line here about Aboriginal and intergovernmental meetings fund. Last year, in the main estimates, it was \$300,000, but we spent \$600,000 during COVID-19. We spent \$600,000, twice what was budgeted. Now, it's going back down to \$300,000, and, as I understand it, Cabinet continues to sign new agreements. We have seen news releases on, I think, one or two of these recently. How can the money go down when we are signing more agreements and more money was spent during COVID but we are budgeting less for the next year? It just does not compute. Can I get an explanation, very briefly? Thanks, Madam Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler):** Thank you, Member. Madam Premier.

**HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I may ask my DM to expand on what I am saying. There is a cycle of how the MOUs are done. One year, the Indigenous governments will meet in Yellowknife, and the next year we will meet in their communities, et cetera, so that does make an impact on the budgets regarding where the travel is. Madam Chair, I would like the deputy minister to expand.

**CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler):** Thank you. Deputy Minister Goldney.

**MR. GOLDNEY:** Thank you, Madam Chair. With that particular fund, the GNWT provides that, those funds, directly to Indigenous governments to support their participation in meetings. It was recognized that this year there was an expectation, particularly given the engagement requirements during the pandemic, that Indigenous governments needed extra support, so that was why there was an increase identified for that period. If we do find that there are increases required, we can certainly revisit those needs, but that was the rationale for that increase for that period. Thank you, Madam Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler):** Thank you, Deputy Minister. Member for Frame Lake.

**MR. O'REILLY:** Thanks, Madam Chair. I guess I would like to respectfully say that, if it was increased during a year with COVID, we are probably going to need more money for the year coming up, but I am going to leave it at that.

I want to move on to federal engagement, where the positions, the support money for that office in Ottawa has been cut. I was sceptical of that work to begin with, in the last Assembly, but I guess I pushed this with the Premier, some of my colleagues on the other side several times, about the importance of not just meeting with a party that is in political power, that holds the majority in the House of Commons. We are now in a situation where it's a minority government; there is going to be an election probably within the next year, and I heard from the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment the other day that his job is not to talk to the opposition parties. I am sorry. Cabinet's job is to talk to the opposition parties when they go to Ottawa, not just the party in power, because, guess what, a year, year and a half from now, they may not be in power. If we want to have any influence on federal policy, you have got to work with the opposition parties. They are the ones who raise issues in the House of Commons and so on. I want to hear from the Premier directly: what is our position and approach in working with opposition parties in the federal House of Commons? Thanks, Madam Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON (Ms. Semmler):** Thank you, Member. Madam Premier.

**HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE:** Thank you, Madam Chair. The protocol within the GNWT is that Ministers deal directly with federal ministers applicable to their portfolios; the Premier deals directly with the Prime Minister or the leaders of parties as appropriate. Yes, the Ministers have not met. We do not know who the ministers of the opposition will be, but we do know who the leaders will be, and so I have made phone calls to all of the leaders of the oppositions, and we are lining them up again. We will continue to have phone calls, making sure that each party that will be putting their name forward understands the needs of the North, and, as many commitments as I can get from that, then that is our goal. So I am meeting regularly and will continue to meet regularly with the opposition members as well as the party in power at this point. Thank you, Madam Chair.