

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 659-19(2): NORTHWEST TERRITORIES ARTS COUNCIL

March 10, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. It appears that the NWT Arts Council has not received the attention it deserves for the last several years. Only half the seats on the council are currently filled, with two having been appointed only in the last couple of weeks. The strategic plan ended in 2018, and much of the website is out of date. Can the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment explain what is going on with the NWT Arts Council and how it was operating with only one person on the board out of six? 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. A lot of things happened. We had a complete turnover in the office that deals with the arts council, and there was no overlap of employees. In a situation like that where we have a limited public service and we don't have these big offices with a lot of lateral positions, we could run into these issues. That was an issue in getting the arts council filled with board members. We had a couple of resignations that were unexpected, but to the Member's question about how it operates with a single position, there is no requirement for a certain number of Members for quorum, so even though there was a single member who was officially appointed, the other members who were in between appointments, who have been since reappointed, did participate.

In May, we are going to have a call for nominations, and we will fill the other seats. We will be back to a full board this spring, and I think the future is looking bright. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In terms of the website, this relates to the Member's other questions about the other website, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, that's also going through a refresh at the same time as part of the same process. That would be taken care of as well. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that, and certainly, my intention is not to embarrass anybody. I just want to make sure that we get the arts council back on track. I think part of the problem is the lack of support from the department and the way that arts seems to fall between two departments, namely Education, Culture and Employment and Industry, Tourism and Investment. Can the Minister tell us what he is doing to support the NWT Arts Council and its independence?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: We currently have staff who provide support to the arts council. As I've said, there were some operational issues last year, but things have improved. The arts council, it's a creation of policy in the Northwest Territories, and through that policy, they have a role in making recommendations to the Minister about how to distribute the arts council funding. We provide them support in doing that and support for their meetings. The best practice is: having peers review the submissions for arts funding. Because of that, when these recommendations from the arts council come to

the Minister, the Minister will look at them, but essentially, they're signed off. It's not something where I'm going to go through and make my own -- say no to this artist, say yes to this artist's submission and things like that. They are arm's length in that sense. However, going forward, we have a new Arts Strategy coming out, and we want to look at ways to improve arts across the territory in any way possible. One of those ways might be looking at the possibility of enhancing the profile of the arts council, perhaps, enhancing its responsibilities, its duties, how it's governed, the support that it has, and things like that. I can leave it there.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. I'm interested in looking at best practices, as well. I think some of those best practices are shown in other Canadian jurisdictions, including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon, Newfoundland and Labrador. Their arts councils are equivalent; they're actually established through legislation. We've got a policy that dates from 1989 that sets up our arts council. Will the Minister commit to reviewing this situation and bring forward legislation to formally establish the NWT Arts Council as an independent body?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: No, I won't make that commitment. However, like I said, this is something that we're looking into.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I was hoping for a yes there, but a firm no is okay sometimes. He's looking into it; that's a good start. The strategic plan developed by the Northwest Territories Arts Council ended in 2018. We're still in a pandemic, but I think there's tremendous potential here for a rebound in tourism. I'd like to know from the Minister what role does he think the Northwest Territories Arts Council, and arts more generally, can play in economic recovery? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Of course, the responsibility for arts in the Northwest Territories lies with Education, Culture and Employment, and the Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment has more of a focus on the economic side. That being said, it is a partnership. When we bring forward the new Arts Strategy, there will be a focus on ensuring that the supports that we're providing are supporting artists to help generate income to help build the economy. We're going to have measurements in the strategy to ensure that this is actually happening. We don't want to just throw money out and hope that it's working. We want to make sure that it's working.

I think that there're tremendous possibilities for the arts in the Northwest Territories, right from the large sort of festivals that we have that can generate tourism and income, right down to the individual artist who might be beating at home. We want to ensure that those artists are supported. To that end, we are going to look at all of the programs that we're offering, all of the funding that we're offering, and going to determine: is this really supporting that goal? This is the way that the government operates now. In addition to that, we also have the government renewal initiative, and Education, Culture and Employment is first up for that initiative, as well. We're really going to be looking at our programs and making sure we are focusing them and delivering the most benefit that we can for the people of the territory and for the economy. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

