

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 667-19(2): MINIMUM WAGE

March 11, 2021

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to assure the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment that I was not dozing off, and he did have my attention when he announced the minimum-wage increase today. However, I want to ask him: I raised this issue about the Minimum Wage Committee in a previous Member's statement. I think he received some kind of report. Is he willing to make that report public? 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. I will have to give the same answer I gave last time with this question, that this report was prepared as advice for Cabinet, and it was prepared by people who were assured that it would be kept confidential. I am not prepared to go back on that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that response, but all we have is the Minister's statement and news release about on what basis the Minister made this very important decision. Can the Minister not at least talk about what the recommendations were from the committee and share those recommendations with the public?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: The committee made three recommendations, as was asked for. One of the recommendations is always the status quo; one of the recommendations was also increasing it to \$15.20.

MR. O'REILLY: I guess I have to guess what the third recommendation was, but I am not going to try to do any math on my feet here. Actually, I will. We have the Wage Top-Up program ending on August 31st, as I understand it, so \$18 an hour. The very next day, people are going to see their hourly wages drop to \$15.20. It just does not seem to make any sense, so can the Minister explain to the public, the people, the 9 percent of our workforce that is now accessing the Wage Top-Up program, why he chose \$15.20, and can he explain why their wages are going to drop from \$18 an hour one day to \$15.20 the next?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Their wages will drop because currently there is a Wage Top-Up program in place, and that runs until August 31st. The next day, the Wage Top-Up program will no longer be operational, and people who are making minimum wage will start receiving \$15.20 an hour from their employer without that additional top-up. I just want to point out that the minimum wage is just that. It's a minimum wage. I think less than a thousand people in the territory make minimum wage. Most of them are between 15 and 24. Most of them are living at home, and perhaps a higher wage will help them get out of that house sooner. The fact is: this is not a demographic of people who are counting on a minimum wage to raise a family for the most part. A lot of those positions, as well, come with gratuities, so a number of those people making minimum wage also

make tips on top of it.

I appreciate what the Member is saying. I was very happy to see that the wage top-up was extended because I do want to make sure that we are providing for our residents. However, we can't expect our businesses to absorb such a great increase in cost over the course of one summer from the \$13.46 to something like \$18 an hour. It's just not feasible. It's not the way businesses are structured right now. However, that being said, we have the second highest minimum wage in Canada. We will on September 1st. I think that's something to be celebrated. I don't think we've ever been in that position before. The only one with the higher minimum wage is Nunavut where the cost of living is much higher, as well, so it's appropriate for what we have in the territory.

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. I'm looking actually at the Department of Finance website. The number of individuals that have accessed the Wage Top-Up program as of March 10th is 2,360, not the 1,000 that the Minister just kind of mentioned, 96 participating businesses. Look, this is a very significant portion of our workforce. They're going to see their wages drop in one day. It's just not fair, Mr. Speaker. I've tried a number of different avenues here to try to get the Minister to recognize this is a real problem and issue. What other solutions does the Minister have? He doesn't seem to agree with the idea of a guaranteed basic income. What are the Minister's solutions to trying to help people make ends meet, the 2,360 people who are already accessing the Wage Top-Up program? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: There may be 2,360 people accessing the Wage Top-Up program. That doesn't mean there're 2,360 people making minimum wage once that program goes away. Those are two different numbers. One is \$18, and one is right now \$13.46; there's a difference there. What do we have in place, Mr. Speaker? That's why I work so hard on education. That's why we're working hard on making investments in early childhood. That's why we're trying to expand the number of early childhood spaces there are for children so that they can get in there and get an enriched environment starting at the beginning of their life.

That's why we're reviewing the curriculum, Mr. Speaker, to make sure it's a curriculum the kids want so that they want to go to school and so that it helps them grow and it helps them learn. It could help them get to that next level and get those jobs. That's why we're looking at our SFA program. That's why we have the best SFA program in Canada, Mr. Speaker. We have the most generous Student Financial Assistance program in Canada to help students get that post-secondary education. That is the biggest contributor to improving your wages, getting a post-secondary education. That's where we need to focus our efforts, Mr. Speaker, not putting this on the backs of businesses. This is on us, and this is what we are doing. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.