

Julie Green—MLA Yellowknife Centre
Bill 6, Cannabis Legalization and Regulation Implementation Act

Committee of the Whole
May 31, 2018

HON JULIE GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I am just going to take a step back. I want to reiterate a point that another of my colleagues made, which is that we didn't ask for this legislation. Ottawa decided within its own power that it was a good idea to legalize cannabis, and what we were left with as the NWT, along with the other territories and provinces, is how to implement the legalization of cannabis. In undertaking this job, a really huge job, we are breaking new ground about how to make that happen. As my colleague the Member for Hay River North says often, and it's worth repeating again, there's never been an end to prohibition before in our lifetime. We don't know what this looks like and we don't have a map for it.

So that left us in the position of reviewing legislation created by the territorial government that was supposed to, or theoretically addresses three areas; harm reduction, the security of the supply chain, and public safety. The result is this huge bill, 60 pages and three schedules. What we know is that people are very leery of this legalization because of the devastation they've witnessed of alcohol in their communities, in their families, and perhaps even in their own lives. Alcohol is a huge problem in the NWT. I noted yesterday that one of the measures of the problems that alcohol causes, which is hospitalizations resulting primarily from alcohol, has again gone up, and it is higher in the NWT than in most other places.

That was a message that I certainly paid attention to when we were travelling around, and we heard more of it in the small communities than we did in the regional centres, I think because the effects are really magnified in those small populations, and because people care deeply for one another, because most often they are related, directly or indirectly.

So the public engagement was very thorough, and the southern committee chaired by my colleague Mr. Thompson, we certainly made every effort to hear what people had to say with open hearts, without prejudging the results. We came back here and we tried to work on ways to improve the legislation that we'd received, and to make it more reflective of what we had heard, and the result was, as my colleague from Yellowknife North said, 20-plus motions to adjust the bill. The government agreed with many, but not all of those adjustments. We are left with two very substantial areas of disagreement; the first, as the member for Yellowknife Centre said, is about vendorship. It's about how new vendors are going to be brought into this process outside the Liquor Commission, and also, as my colleague from Tu Nedhe-Willideh described very well, how to make this into a system that is fair to everyone and not into a two-tier system, where people with liquor stores have access to cannabis, and people without liquor stores don't.

Today we are going to try again to address that issue, and another issue that is very important to me, which is the issue of co-location. There is no question in my mind, and

I will speak about this at length, that co-location is a bad idea. It takes the problems of alcohol and compounds them with cannabis. In the current vendorship situation of having sales only in communities that have commercial market rental, there is no reason to have co-location. That's something that we'll be talking about.

Mr. Chair, people often ask me, not always in a joking way, what we do when we're not sitting here. The answer is that we do this kind of work. We take government bills, we make every effort to understand them, and then we take them out to the public and ask them what they think of the legislation. We do our best to reflect what they've said to us and to improve the legislation that we've been given. That is a big part of what we do, and the Order Paper reflects that we are going to be doing much more of this in the time remaining in the 18th Assembly.

Finally, I just want to reflect on how unfortunate it is that the Regular Members have split between the northern MLAs and the other MLAs in support of the amendments. Last week the Members supported the amendments, but I realize that that may not be the case today. It turns out that solidarity is fleeting, and I think that's very unfortunate; but at the same time I also recognize that it's an issue that I don't have any influence over. My hope today is for a thorough and respectful debate of the remaining amendments, and that we will be able to continue improving the act before it's made law. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Blake): Thank you, Ms. Green. Would the Minister like to respond.

HON LOUIS SEBERT: Thank you, Mr. Chair. There are an awful lot of opinions out there as to how we should proceed. I know that when our officials went out, and I'm looking at the report on what we heard, there were quite a few different suggestions about how to proceed. I do see, at page 20 of the report, there seemed to be, when asked the question, "Do you favour sales controlled by a GNWT agency or a more open system," there was a slight majority in favour of a GNWT agency, such as the Liquor Commission, but when we got to other questions, such as retail model suggestions, there were many, many different suggestions.

One that received the most support seemed to be the Liquor Commission one. There's one that suggested a tobacco model, a pharmacy health centre model, online mail order model, GNWT-operated dispensaries, private retailers, entrepreneurs. Raising taxes, I see, is one, and nowhere -- I guess those were opposed -- and others. I'm not sure what they wanted. It's not surprising that there were an awful lot of opinions on the other side of the House, if I can put it that way, because there are a lot of differences of opinion within Cabinet. However, we felt in the end that this was the way to proceed. So there were active discussions on our side, also.

Ms. Green has raised the issue of co-location, which is a complicated issue, and I am well aware that the McLellan Report stated that that might not be the best way to go, but that same report acknowledged that smaller and remote communities may not have the flexibility to accommodate a dedicated separate retail location. So it's a very, very tough issue. We are alive to it. As I say, I think all of us had different opinions going into this situation. We're now having to respond to the federal government's initiative, and I think

we've come forward with a compromise bill that probably doesn't make everybody happy, but I think it is most appropriate in the circumstances. Thank you, Mr. Chair