

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE
QUESTION 19-19(2): CHANGE IN AURORA COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

February 6, 2020

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. There is a lack of clarity about why Tom Weegar is no longer the president of Aurora College. He has told the media that he was fired, yet the Minister has told the media that he resigned. As I said in the House yesterday, I believe that the public is owed an explanation for why this man is no longer working for the government after the extensive efforts made to recruit him to this job in the first place. Can the Minister please provide clarification?

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Yellowknife Centre. Minister of Education, Culture and Employment.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank my colleague for allowing me to clarify this situation a little bit. I am not going to speak to the reasons for termination. That is the Premier's domain. That position served at the pleasure of the Premier. I will note that I was aware last week that there was going to be a meeting between Dr. Weegar and the Premier. I didn't know what the ultimate outcome of that would be. I do not know if it was presupposed. Late last week, I discovered that Dr. Weegar and the GNWT would be parting ways. I wasn't privy to the conversation, so I do not know if the conversation ended with a firing, per se, or if it ended with both parties agreeing that perhaps it was time to part ways. On Tuesday, after the media release was issued, I received an email sent on behalf of Dr. Tom Weegar that stated, "After much contemplation and soul-searching, I decided to step away from post-secondary education leadership for the time being," which led me to believe that he was stepping away from post-secondary leadership education for the time being, voluntarily. That is why I made the statements that I did. It has come to light, however, that this was, in fact, a termination. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I appreciate the Minister clarifying that. One of the things that the former president has said is that he felt a strong resistance to change from the college administration and that this factored into his decision. Is the Minister aware of this issue, and what does he plan to do about it?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Change is always hard. I assumed years ago or, rather, when this was first discussed in the Assembly, that it would be difficult to change. Actually, one of the first meetings that I had, I think the very first meeting that I had with Dr. Weegar, I asked him if he was getting any resistance and, if so, that I wanted to work

with him to ensure that we made these changes. I am all in favour of developing a world-class, arm's-length university here in the Northwest Territories. There will be some changes. There will be some bold changes, and I am fully in support of those. Going forward, maybe it is something that I need to be a little more forceful with, more alive to, but I am confident that the team that we have in place now can implement those changes.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that response. It sounds like not everybody is on the same page, even now, with the bold idea to transform the college. I am wondering if you have any plans to reassure staff and students, and, in fact, to inform staff and students and the public, that this transformation is on track, it is going to go ahead, and that you are going to support it whole-heartedly, whatever the resistance?

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Yesterday, responding to questions from the Member for Yellowknife North, I committed my support to this project. I think that this is an amazing opportunity. I am privileged to be part of this transformation of Aurora College into a polytechnic university, and I am whole-heartedly behind it. I have been having conversations as of late that we need to do a better job explaining this to the public, and so, moving forward, I am going to be releasing more information about what we are doing. We have a plan that is nearing completion, an implementation plan, which will lay out the next steps. That is going to be ready for release after the sitting in the summer, but I have decided that we need to fill that information void and get some more information out there so that everyone can be excited, because this is a great opportunity for our students; it's a great opportunity for the people of the territory, because we're going to be able to fill a lot of these positions that we can't fill right now; and it's a great opportunity for all of the communities where the college is located, because I expect that every community with a university campus will benefit economically.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Final question, supplementary. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the Minister's answer on that. I am looking, really, more at specific communication that would take place with the staff and students at Aurora College. Apparently, they didn't see this change in leadership coming. They feel uncertain about their own places there and about the future of the college, so is the Minister going to make an effort to talk directly with students and not only get their buy-in to this change, but to reassure them that he is, in fact, in charge? Thank you.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON: Direct communication with the staff and the students is part and parcel of the type of communication that I want to do, and I will be reaching out, and I will reinforce my commitment. Like I said, this is a great opportunity. I am lucky to be involved with it, and I am going to see it through to completion, and we are going to wind up with a world-class university in the Northwest Territories. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.