

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE
QUESTION 212-12(2): IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TOURISM

March 16, 2020

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Premier. A month is obviously a long time in the life of the coronavirus outbreak. It has now become a pandemic and there are more cases in Europe than China. Can the Minister update us now on the impact of the coronavirus health crisis on the tourism industry in the NWT? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Yellowknife Centre. Honourable Premier.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't have current statistics on where, exactly, the tourism industry is within the Northwest Territories; however, it doesn't take very much research to look outside our doors and see that the numbers are going down. There are two things that are happening. One, the numbers are going down, and the public is concerned that we still have tourists on our streets. I'd like to first of all say that all tourists have been asked to self-isolate when they come into Canada. We have brought up the concerns to the federal government in talking about international travel. It's really hard to self-isolate when people come into the NWT for one or two days. It is something that we're working on with the federal government and it will impact the tourism sector within the Northwest Territories and throughout Canada, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

MS. GREEN: I appreciate that response. The ITI Minister previously committed to more robust data collection about impacts. That's important, but it doesn't seem like the highest priority right now. My question is: what can the Premier do to support tourism operators who have had to cancel tours and lay off staff through this spring and summer?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: We are concerned about our economy. We're concerned about all businesses in the NWT, including the tourism industry. Right now, at this time, like I said, we're waiting for the federal government. They are in charge of travel airlines. We are asking for them to actually confirm how they will ensure that our residents are safe with the amount of tourists, which does imply that we're asking them to support not having travellers come to the Northwest Territories internationally, as well.

It's already impacting. We've already got letters from the tourist industry. We've got letters from airlines. We've got letters from the business communities already. The

economy is going to hurt. What I can say is that we have brought those concerns to the federal government. Concerns have been voiced from every jurisdiction across Canada. Our federal government is looking for changes; they're looking at programs such as making adjustments to the EI that might be able to help people. At this time, all I can say is the federal government is aware of our concerns. They know that we're looking for some kind of economic stimulus, some kind of economic benefit for us, and they have promised to get back to us and they've promised to take the considerations of the whole territories into consideration.

MS. GREEN: I appreciate that answer. I see that the onus is really on the federal government to come up with some kind of contingency fund to assist not only tourism operators but also sectors of the economy that are currently hurting. What kind of responsibility does the GNWT have in this circumstance other than connecting with the federal government to come up with those contingency plans?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: For businesses that are a little bit worried or need some extra assistance, they can contact our Department of ITI for assistance. We do have the Business Development Program that might be able to assist them in some long-term plans. We're looking at bumping up; we're working. Right now, the priority is on health and safety. I have to put that. Right now, we're scrambling to figure out how we're going to take care of our residents, our long-term care, our most vulnerable in society. At the same time, we're looking at the economic detriments, so we're looking at increase, probably, in Income Support, people on Income Support. Again, we're advocating to the federal government for EI. We're looking at tools and resources that will be able to help our industry. It's a day-to-day battle that we're facing right now, an hour-to-hour battle. Our officials, all of our Ministers, myself, we're all getting updated regularly every single day. Things are changing every day. All I can say is the federal government does know our needs and we're trying to work as best we can with our limited resources.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Honourable Premier. Final supplementary, Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the Premier for that. I appreciate that the focus is on health and safety, but I think that there are people and businesses who are stressed about their livelihood because, the businesses they own or the businesses they work for, they don't necessarily have generous sick times or contingency plans to keep people going while they have to be off work for circumstances that are beyond their control. I would really urge the Premier to task the ITI staff with a recovery plan, to use those federal resources when they come through,

to see if there is anything that can be repurposed in our budget that would help people to continue with their livelihoods. What I'm concerned about is that we will have the health crisis, and then we'll go into an economic crisis because of the health crisis. Can the Minister assure me that that kind of planning will take place? Thank you,

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: The Member is correct. Once the health crisis is done, whether we end up with a huge incidence of a number of residents with COVID-19 or not, this is going to impact our businesses in the Northwest Territories. It's not only the tourism business; it's all businesses that we are worried about at this point. We are working diligently within our departments and across jurisdictions with the federal government to come up with an economic plan. At this point, though, it would be irresponsible for us to just start bailing out one or two businesses, because my instinct is telling me that more businesses will be impacted by this, so we need to make sure that we plan fully and that we have a comprehensive plan as we move forward. That is my commitment, that we're on this now and, as soon as we have some more information, we will be sharing that with the public and the business community. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.