

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

QUESTION 249-19(2): SMALL BUSINESS GRANTS

May 28, 2020

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Industry, Tourism and Investment. As I said in my statement, I believe the GNWT has failed small business in this territory by not offering enough support through the pandemic. At the end of April, the Minister previewed her recovery plan and made the statement that some small businesses are expected to fail or scale down. My question for the Minister is: what is her responsibility to prevent small businesses from closing? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Yellowknife Centre. Minister of Industry, Tourism and Investment.

HON. KATRINA NOKLEBY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I made that statement, I was definitely talking about a global situation. That is what I had heard, that, globally, we would be seeing small business fail. Ultimately, my goal is to not have any Northwest Territories businesses fail through COVID-19, but of course, that is going to be a challenge as we are all aware. My role for small business is to be an advocate. I have been doing so. I know there has been conversation around: federal government is doing things and the GNWT is not. I would like for people to be aware that the way that the federal government knows what the GNWT or what the Northwest Territories residents need is through the lobbying efforts of myself and my colleagues here with them at our federal tables as well as our one-on-one meetings that we do have.

My role is to be the voice of small business. I do understand that small business is feeling not heard at the moment. However, we have introduced supports, and we quickly introduced the BDIC loan. It was actually rolled out on March 20th. The border closed March 21st. By March 25th, applications had ended and money was starting to flow, or it at least being assessed. I do not have the exact date of when payments would have started. I know there is concern that they were loans and not free money. However, in order to get that liquidity out fast to people, we wanted to be able to make the requirements less. There would have been a lot more requirements around getting relief funding out without just handing it out as a grant. We wanted to ensure people could access money quickly. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: Thank you to the Minister for that. I hear the Minister say she thinks she is done all she can, but small business mostly doesn't agree. I want to ask you specifically about BDIC. BDIC has a surplus of \$30 million. Small businesses told me very clearly that they need grants, that in a situation where they are closed for good or their revenue has gone down by 90 percent, they are not interested in taking on more debt. My question for the Minister is: why didn't the Minister offer grants from BDIC to qualified businesses rather than loans?

HON. KATRINA NOKLEBY: I don't believe I said that I have done everything I can do. I will say, though, that I am doing the best that I can to my ability. I have several areas of business and industry where I need to advocate for everyone. I am only one person, and I do acknowledge that there are things that we could be doing better. I believe I already answered the question as to why we went with loans instead of grants with the BDIC. However, I do commit to coming back to the Member with a more fulsome answer on that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I appreciate the Minister's commitment to come back with a fulsome response. That is helpful. My next question is about the business advisory council. The answer to my colleague's questions yesterday indicated that this is a secret committee which would have the final say on whether to reveal their membership and their terms of reference and whether, in fact, we are going to know anything about them. Can the Minister confirm that this government is giving this council discretion to be a secret committee?

HON. KATRINA NOKLEBY: What the question was yesterday was: would I make the terms of reference and the membership public? It was not whether I would share it with the Members on the other side of the room. No, this will not be a secret committee. The reason for my response yesterday was that I do not want to tie the hands of anyone prior to even having the first conversation with them. I am open to sharing that and posting that publicly. However, I will have that discussion with the council, and we will move forward as the council sees fit.

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

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that answer from the Minister. It's actually imperative that you shore up the credibility of this initiative by making as much of it public as you possibly can as soon as you can. My next and final question is what this council is supposed to accomplish and over what period of time. Thank you.

HON. KATRINA NOKLEBY: This council will be one of three that will be used by Cabinet and all of the government in order to be better informed by the stakeholders as was part of our 19th Legislative Assembly mandate and commitment priorities. We will be working towards making more evidence-based decisions by looking at or getting the feedback from the councils and their inputs, their recommendations. There will be reports provided that will be sent to the executive council and also shared as part of the co-committee that we will be having with the Regular MLAs and ourselves on economic recovery. The plan is to use the experts in the areas of their industries and sector in order to provide the better responses or the better relief packages or recovery packages that we can provide as a government. There is no way that we are going to be able to do it if we don't take feedback. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.