

MEMBER'S STATEMENT — JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

Motion of Revocation—Minister Katrina Nockleby

August 26, 2020

MS. GREEN: Mr. Speaker, in the lead up to the last election, I offered a series of campaign readiness workshops in Yellowknife in the hope of getting more women to run. The Member for Great Slave attended some of those sessions, along with some of the other women in this Chamber. I had high hopes they would be elected and bring their many talents to provide good governance and better the lives of NWT residents. The end result, as we all know, was the historic election of nine women from all across the territory, and from among that group a woman premier and three women Cabinet ministers. We had and still have much to celebrate for the gains we've made in women's leadership. But obviously, it's not all good news. In the last assembly we had four revocation debates that concerned male Cabinet ministers. With more women in Cabinet, we are now having one about a woman, not because she is a woman but because of her performance and behaviour in her ministerial role.

Mr. Speaker, five months into our term, as people were getting comfortable in their roles, the coronavirus pandemic changed everything about life as we had known it. Providing good government took on a new importance as residents looked to government to keep us safe and help weather the economic fall out. The stakes then and now have never been higher for all of us but especially for Cabinet and especially for our economy.

Mr. Speaker, we knew when we were elected in October that our economy was weak. The diamond mines are entering their last years of production. There are no new mines ready to provide the same number of high-paying jobs, contracts, taxes, royalties and Impact Benefit Agreements. There are projects pending but it's been difficult to find investors. Oil and gas activity is minimal and low global prices make it unlikely that sector will rebound. The construction sector is not as robust as it once was, now that the new Stanton Territorial hospital is finished. Tourism largely dependent on international visitors was our one bright hope, but COVID has put that sector into a coma.

The Cabinet's initial response to the economic fallout of the pandemic lockdown was encouraging. The Minister of Industry Tourism and Investment reduced fees for businesses, such as bridge tolls, proposed a new business advisory council, and provided access to loans and loan payment deferrals from the Business Development Investment Corporation. These measures were well received but implementation fell behind.

As I said in this House in May, small businesses did not feel supported. Some firms managed to stay open and innovate to serve their customers. Even so, some reported a total revenue decline, losses which left them struggling to pay their rent, pay their workers and order inventory. The minister acknowledged that small business was in a tight spot but she couldn't provide an answer about enabling BDIC to make grants available to eligible businesses. Instead the federal government offered grants to businesses and wage top ups.

Rolling out the SEED money when it was approved was another implementation fail. Members approved a three-month extension of money for government operations in March. At the same time we approved program money for the whole of this fiscal year. That included \$4 million for the ITI program called Support for Entrepreneurs and Economic Development. SEED is an important program. It helps create new businesses and new jobs. But despite the dire economic situation, the department didn't call for applications until two-months after the spending was approved. This is a critical gap in timing. Employers were ready and willing to apply weeks earlier.

Another implementation fail is the length of time it took to set up the business advisory council. The minister announced it in March but it didn't come to life until June and we haven't heard any more about it since. In the Yukon, the business advisory council was quickly assembled and helped the Yukon government put together a \$10 million relief package. Hearing from business early and often is a key to helping them recover.

Another issue is the weak government response to Dominion Diamond's decision to go into creditor protection. NWT businesses are owed \$13.2 million at a time when the economy is in steep decline. The government is also owed money. How is the government representing its interests and those of resident business owners during the creditor protection process? I asked the ITI minister to write a letter of support to the courts for Dominion Diamonds, emphasizing its importance to our economy. It took months to get a response from her and the response was no. I found the reasons for not writing the letter unsatisfactory. If there was ever a time to walk the talk of supporting mining this was it and yet nothing happened.

Turning now to the Department of Infrastructure, members have talked about the need to spend government dollars in the North as much as possible. We've been told that building infrastructure is a key economic driver in the NWT. When I learned from the member for Monfwi that not a single heavy equipment operator had been hired from his region for construction of the road to Whati, I wondered exactly what kind of benefits the region and the territory were getting from this \$411 million investment. It turns out they are fewer than we expected and hoped for. The same pattern was about to repeat itself with the Behchoko access road until the Tlicho leadership put its foot down and the premier had to broker the compromise her minister should have been leading.

Recent reporting on contracting for the Slave Geological Province Road indicates an even more disappointing result. Only nine per cent of the \$1 million spent to date has been spent with northern companies. There too procurement left the Yellowknives Dene on the sidelines, resulting in them withdrawing their essential support for the project.

It's worth noting the importance of prioritizing Indigenous procurement because of the potential of Indigenous led companies to employ northerners, particularly those who live in small communities. This is one of the key areas where government can influence the delivery of employment and contracting benefits to northern firms and workers. Private companies such as the diamond mines and Indigenous development corporations spend most of their contracting money with northern companies. Why can't the government do the same?

So those are my observations on the Minister's performance of her broad departmental duties. My committee work has not brought me in regular direct contact with the Minister, but where I have had an opportunity to assess the Minister's performance of these duties, I have found performance is poor.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Great Slave continued to struggle to manage her office. I forwarded a dozen questions on behalf of constituents. A few times I got a timely response but more often responses were late or didn't happen at all. These are requests for help from people in trouble, and going to their MLA is often their last hope. Now more than ever, providing timely responses to constituents and business is critical. Further, the minister did little to engage regular MLAs in departmental initiatives, and when she did I had little sense that our input was respected or valued. I don't have many meetings with the Member for Great Slave but I have witnessed the Member for Great Slave behave inappropriately swearing in explosive and shocking anger. This is not the behaviour I expect of a minister and a colleague.

Mr. Speaker, when the last sitting began, regular members discussed a motion of revocation, a motion I supported for the reasons given above. These concerns were presented in the House as members' statements. Regular members also met with the Member for Great Slave. We told her unequivocally that we needed to see improvement and we needed to see it immediately. The premier sat in the same meeting and offered a resolution. She said she would support the minister to make the necessary changes in the areas we highlighted. The Member for Great Slave promised to address our concerns and to manage her office in a way that was more responsive to us and our constituents. The fact is, that promise was not fulfilled. If anything the situation is worse.

The Premier has documented her attempts to help the Member for Great Slave to get on track with both performance and behavioural issues. But the Minister has failed to make the necessary improvements. Members have invited the Minister three times to respond to these criticisms and she has chosen not to attend. She has decided to drag this process out in ways that are both expensive and frustrating.

Mr. Speaker, I have heard the current impasse described as a cat fight. I reject and am disgusted by that characterization. It would not be applied to two men who disagree with one another. It is sexist and demeaning. To be clear, the situation we are discussing today is NOT an argument against electing women. Women are fallible just as men are. We won't all succeed but the failure of one is not the failure of all. There is enduring value in having women in leadership to represent the perspectives of half the population even if there are predictable bumps in the road.

We are here, all of us, men and women alike, to govern the Northwest Territories. We need to continue our best efforts to find ways to work together. We must regain public support for the good work we do as we focus on rebuilding our economy as our top priority. It's time for the chaos created by the Member for Great Slave to end. I support the premier's right and decision to remove her portfolios and I will be voting in favour of the motion of revocation.

Thank you Mr. Speaker.