

Negotiating Treaty, Land, Resources, and Self-Government Agreements

Madam Speaker, settling and implementing treaty, land, resources, and self-government agreements is a priority for the Government of the Northwest Territories and a key part of the Mandate of the Government of the Northwest Territories.

Concluding agreements with our Indigenous government partners will advance reconciliation, recognize, and affirm Indigenous and treaty rights, support program and service delivery by Indigenous governments, and set the stage for economic self-determination.

I understand why many MLAs and residents want to see faster progress on resolving outstanding land claims. This work has been underway for decades and Northerners, including myself, want to see modern treaties settled.

Madam Speaker, when negotiating agreements, we must also recognize that for many of the Indigenous governments, there are strong feelings rooted in a history of colonialism and mistreatment. In many cases there is significant mistrust in the Government of the Northwest Territories. The territorial government is seen as a competitor, as a colonial imposition, or, in some cases, an illegitimate government altogether. This, of course, makes the negotiations process more complex, and makes the work of relationship-building critical to making progress.

I am proud of the work we have done during the life of this government to advance negotiations. A particular focus has been placed on meaningful engagement and building on our collaborative partnership with Indigenous governments.

In 2020, this government implemented a first of its kind collaborative development protocol for lands and resources legislation, building on the promise of devolution to work better with Indigenous governments. The protocol is unique in Canada.

Madam Speaker, this government has also established new intergovernmental tables to work directly with Indigenous governments, including:

- a Modern Treaty and Self-Government Partners' table that allows for dialogue around the implementation of land claims and self-government agreements between those Indigenous governments with settled agreements and Executive Council members, and;
- an NWT Council of Leaders' table where all Indigenous governments meet with the Government of the Northwest Territories and work on matters of common concern, including the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Madam Speaker, these tables did not exist prior to this government. This work is meant to build relationships and help set the conditions for trust and success in all our work with Indigenous governments. We also worked very closely with Indigenous governments during the pandemic and continue to engage on a range of shared objectives, including everything from housing to climate change.

Madame Speaker, I am proud of how this government has changed our approach to work more collaboratively with our Indigenous partners, to listen to their concerns, and to be flexible and accommodating in order to advance negotiations. In this regard, I believe we have set a positive example for others to follow, throughout Canada.

Early in this government, Indigenous leadership told me they were frustrated by the negotiating mandate on core principles and objectives used by the Government of the Northwest Territories that sets out a mandate related to the standards expected of Indigenous self-governments.

The core principles and objectives were originally adopted as an innovative made-in-the-NWT solution to a federal mandate requirement to have Indigenous self-governments “meet or beat” existing federal or provincial standards. To address the frustration, I asked we assess its usefulness. As a result, this government eliminated that mandate in the interest of advancing files.

Madam Speaker, we need to be thinking outside the box when it comes to negotiations. In an effort to do so, we have also taken the extraordinary step of clearly stating the Government of the Northwest Territories’ key principles and interests guiding negotiations. No territorial government before has done this. Making the key principles and interest public is a significant commitment to transparency and provides more openness on the interests of the Government of the Northwest Territories in negotiations. In addition to the key principles and interests, I also heard complaints that Indigenous governments felt the territorial government did not have mandates in negotiations. We have since summarized our comprehensive mandates and made those summaries public, further demonstrating our commitment to concluding agreements.

I have never been content to just let negotiations continue without trying new things. However, residents should know that delays in completing agreements are complex. As we explore new ideas and approaches, we must recognize that sometimes Indigenous governments need time to build understanding and support within their membership, or that the Government of Canada, a partner in all negotiations, might introduce a new concept to the table that requires further examination.

These governments also have elections and changes in leadership. Of course, delays might simply be the result of any party taking a hard position and being unwilling, at a particular moment in time, to explore interests that might see a different solution emerge.

Madam Speaker, I am proud of how this government has changed its our approach to work more collaboratively with our Indigenous partners, to listen to their concerns, and to be flexible and accommodating in order to advance negotiations. I continue to be willing to

hear from Indigenous governments what compromises on both our parts are the key to concluding agreements.

There is less than a year left in the life of the 19th Legislative Assembly. I want to take this opportunity to reaffirm this government's commitment to work toward settling and implementing treaty, land, resources, and self-government agreements over the next year. This work has required significant effort, not just for the Government of the Northwest Territories, but for Indigenous governments throughout the territories, and I want to close by acknowledging and commending their efforts in these areas as well.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.