

**The Honourable Bob McLeod
Premier**

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Sessional Statement

Mr. Speaker, I would like to welcome my colleagues back to the Legislative Assembly. As this sitting gets underway, I would like to update Members and the public on some recent activities that the government has undertaken to advance the mandate and priorities of the Legislative Assembly, in service of the people of the Northwest Territories.

Shortly after the close of the last sitting of the Legislative Assembly, all Ministers went to Ottawa for a series of meetings with federal ministers, parliamentary committees and others. The purpose of this trip was to share the Federal Engagement Strategy and make a concerted push to build awareness of three infrastructure priorities related to climate change.

Our priorities, selected on the basis of current federal priorities and infrastructure funding programs, included Taltson Hydro Expansion, Renewable Solutions for Off-Grid Diesel Communities and All-Weather Road Infrastructure for Adapting to Climate Impacts. Our discussions with the Prime Minister and others emphasized opportunities for reducing the cost of living for Northwest Territories residents and contributing to national climate change objectives by increasing the use of renewable energy.

I am pleased to say, Mr. Speaker, that not long after this trip, we received positive news about two important infrastructure projects that Canada will be partnering with us on: the road to Canyon Creek and the Tłıchǵ All-Season Road. Work on these two projects will provide jobs to Sahtu and Tłıchǵ residents and work for local

businesses. They will improve the quality of transportation infrastructure in these two regions and, in the case of Whatì, provide year round road access that will help lower the cost of living for its residents.

These projects will also help the Government of the Northwest Territories deliver on its mandate commitments to advance the Mackenzie Valley Highway and make an all-weather road from Highway number 3 to Whatì. The Tłıchǫ All-Season Road also responds to the commitment in our mandate to support mineral exploration and the mining sector by capturing opportunities to build transportation infrastructure that enables resources to get to market.

Climate change is a reality that Northerners see and feel every day and we must do our part to contribute to national and international efforts to address it. In December, I was proud to attend the First Ministers' Meeting in Ottawa and join with the Prime Minister and Canada's Premiers in agreeing to the *Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change*.

The Framework outlines critical actions that governments in Canada will take to grow the economy while reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The Framework also includes a commitment to help remote and northern communities reduce their reliance on diesel by connecting these communities to electricity grids and implementing renewable energy system.

As part of implementing the Pan-Canadian Framework, the Northwest Territories and Canada have agreed to work together on studying the issue of putting a price on carbon. This will ensure the Northwest Territories is contributing towards national emission reduction targets, but which will not raise the cost of living for our residents or harm our economy. We expect that to be informed by the work the

Government of the Northwest Territories is currently doing, including public engagement and consultation with Standing Committees, to develop a Climate Change Strategic Framework and an Energy Strategy for the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Speaker, the recent decision by the Federal government to declare a moratorium on offshore oil and gas development in the Beaufort Sea underscores the need for a well thought out vision for ongoing growth and development in the three northern territories.

While the Northwest Territories is prepared to do its part to combat climate change, we also need to make sure we take care of the people who live here. People in the Beaufort Delta have had the promise of prosperity through oil and gas development dangling in front of them for decades, and they are still waiting.

If we are going to ask them to pass up or delay one chance for significant economic growth, we need to offer something in return. The people who make the North their home need hope for the future, hope for good jobs and steady incomes.

Who speaks for the Arctic, Mr. Speaker? Many provinces and countries have an interest in the Arctic, but do they have our interests at heart? Increasingly, I believe that the North needs to speak up for itself. We cannot simply rely on the good intentions of others to look out for the needs of our people. If we want a future for our children and grandchildren, we need to be the ones who define it. Northern voices and Northern governments have to be the leading voice in decisions about the North, and a pan-territorial Sustainable Development Strategy will give us one.

I have spoken of this issue to the Prime Minister and have been talking to my colleagues from Nunavut and Yukon, most recently last week in Vancouver, about

collaborating on the creation of a vision and strategy for sustainable growth and development in the North. I look forward to discussing the development of this strategy with Members and to getting your input into the vision, principles and plans to guide development in our territory.

As Members know, all Ministers and the Chair of the Standing Committee on Economic Development and Environment travelled to the Mineral Exploration Roundup in Vancouver last week. Representatives from the Government of the Northwest Territories regularly attend this conference, and similar conferences like the NWT Geoscience Forum and the annual Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada convention, to promote mining and exploration in the Northwest Territories, meet with industry representatives and discuss how to support responsible development of our mineral resources.

Our government continues to make diversifying the economy a priority, particularly in high-potential areas like manufacturing, agriculture, fishing and tourism. At the same time, we need to recognize that mining is and will continue to be the engine of our economy for the immediate future. Mining currently contributes 20 percent of our direct GDP and provides jobs to over one out of every 10 people working in our territory. Since 1996, the diamond mines have spent \$19 billion dollars on Northwest Territories businesses, including \$5 billion on Aboriginal owned businesses.

The economic activity associated with mining is a tremendous source of income to Northwest Territories residents and revenue for government programs and services that we cannot take for granted. Other sectors of the economy have the potential for growth, but will not equal the contributions of mining in the near term. If we want good jobs for Northerners and strong, stable revenues to pay for government

programs and services, we need to continue to find ways to support this important industry.

A critical requirement for supporting economic development, as well as conservation activities, is creating certainty around access to land and plans for how it will be used. Settling outstanding land claims in the Dehcho and South Slave is one of the most important steps we will be able to take and we look forward to receiving reports from the two Ministerial Special Representatives appointed by myself and the Federal government to look into claims in those regions.

We also continue to make good progress on self-government negotiations with the Gwich'in, Inuvialuit, Colville Lake, Fort Good Hope, Norman Wells and Tulita.

Creating land use plans for all regions of the Northwest Territories and improving our regulatory framework are two other important steps that will contribute to certainty for all users. To this end, the government continues to work towards a Dehcho Land Use Plan and is also preparing to bring forward several pieces of legislation related to land and natural resources management. This legislation is part of the "devolve and evolve" commitment that the last government made, and which this Assembly will continue to be responsible for.

Much of our first year in government, Mr. Speaker, was spent in establishing our mandate and our plans for fulfilling it. With that foundational work behind us, we will now be devoting substantial attention to preparing and bringing forward legislation that will help us implement our mandate.

Looking after our people is another area we continue to make progress on. Transformation of the health system continues and we continue to work with

communities to reduce the burden of chronic disease, including through the government's cancer strategy.

We also continue to take steps to insure that our Elders have the support they need, where they need it. That includes construction on a new 18 bed long-term care facility in Behchokò and a plan to put extended care beds into a purpose-designed unit in the redeveloped Stanton building. This plan will not only improve the service provided to people in extended care, but will allow us to reallocate significant capital dollars to immediately address the short-fall in long-term care beds.

Helping create a prosperous and sustainable future for the territory is a major responsibility for any government, Mr. Speaker. Tomorrow, the Minister of Finance will deliver the annual budget, which will outline the government's plan for investing in the future of this territory and its people.

Budget making is always a balancing act, Mr. Speaker. There are always more needs than there is money to meet them, and then there are more wants on top of that.

Finding a way to pay for the essentials and some of the nice-to-have wants without breaking the bank is a challenge, even at the best of times. It is even harder when times are tough and revenues are uncertain.

Over the past year, Mr. Speaker, Cabinet has been out talking to the people of the Northwest Territories in our open houses and other meetings and hearing about what matters to them. We have listened to what the people have said about important issues like education, employment in small communities, public safety,

looking after our Elders and combatting homelessness. Those conversations have been reflected in the budget that the government will be proposing tomorrow.

Our budget will fund essential programs and services for Northwest Territories residents, makes new investments in the priorities of this Assembly and is financially affordable and sustainable.

It is a prudent and responsible budget that reflects the fiscal and economic reality of the Northwest Territories right now. It proposes further adjustments to our spending and revenues to ensure we do not run up government debt to unsustainable levels or jeopardize the good credit rating our government has enjoyed for more than a decade.

At the same time, we have taken a hard look at our original business plans and eliminated several million dollars in reductions proposed in them.

Our budget is the product of the consensus system and ongoing formal dialogue between Cabinet and Legislative Assembly Standing Committees. We share Committees' commitment to the priorities of this Assembly and have included many of their recommendations in the budget that we are presenting. It may not be the exact budget to suit the individual views and preferences each of us have, but I hope the Legislative Assembly can collectively agree it is the right budget for all the people and communities of the Northwest Territories at this time.

Doing business differently by strengthening consensus was one of the priorities we identified at the outset of this Legislative Assembly, Mr. Speaker. Strengthening consensus is ultimately something we all need to be responsible for, and how we

propose to do that may require some focused discussions among ourselves in Caucus.

At the same time, Cabinet is certainly willing to look at ways that it can solicit more meaningful input from Members and involve them more actively in shaping government decisions.

The Joint Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Relations was one effort to encourage dialogue with Members on a topic that is important to all residents. I think there is room for similar committees on other matters of shared interest. In particular, I would like to propose that we establish a joint committee on rural and remote communities, where Members and Ministers could work together to ensure that the needs of these communities are not overlooked.

We may also want to consider the value of periodic joint meetings of Cabinet Committees and Standing Committees that share interests, such as the Standing Committee on Social Development and the Community Wellness and Safety Committee of Cabinet. We could even hold these meetings in public, in keeping with our commitment to openness and transparency.

If Members feel they need more meaningful input into budget development, or a different kind of input, we could consider ways to accommodate that, including doing more of our shared budget work in public.

The consensus system and process, has served this territory well for almost 50 years now. It is worth preserving and strengthening.

It is a system that lets multiple voices and multiple interests come together to make decisions that are stronger because all sides are considered, while the rigid positions associated with party politics tend to be avoided. We have a diverse territory where one size does not fit all, Mr. Speaker, we need to make sure we support that diversity in our discussions here.

It is the system that saw Members from both sides of the House become a strong and united voice that argued for the recognition of Aboriginal treaty rights in the Canadian Constitution. In a way, the decision of all 22 Members of the Legislative Assembly to travel to Ottawa in 1981 to ensure these rights were not removed from the Constitution set the precedent for later missions like NWT Days.

It is the system that helped decide and plan the division of the Northwest Territories in 1999, leading to the first major redrawing of the Canadian map in almost one hundred years.

It is the system that has steadily allowed the people of the Northwest Territories, through their elected representatives, take on increasing responsibility for the decisions that affect them, including education, health care, transportation and the devolution of lands and resources in the last government.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, times are changing, and people's expectations for their government are changing with them. Keeping up with those expectations is part of why we have made changing the way we do business a priority.

Staying true to the spirit and intent of consensus is a challenge that all Members of the Legislative Assembly are responsible for, Mr. Speaker. Meeting that challenge does not always come easily, particularly when we are asked to give and take on

issues that we care about personally. We will all face that challenge during the upcoming session, but I am convinced that if we all remain committed to doing what is best for the people of the Northwest Territories, we will find a path forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.