

Sessional Statement – October 2022

Mr. Speaker, good afternoon. It is a pleasure to be back in the House for the Fall sitting of the 19th Legislative Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, just over three years ago many of us were elected to this House to represent residents in constituencies across the territory. With just under one year remaining in the life of this government, we have much to accomplish.

I look forward to working collaboratively, and respectfully, to ensure we make the best decisions for the Northwest Territories. This means ensuring future Legislative Assemblies are in a good position to continue to make progress on some of the important work we have and will achieve in this government.

The past three years have been like no other experienced by previous Legislative Assemblies in the Northwest Territories, or by governments around the world. The first global pandemic in over a century required us to shift our focus. Mr. Speaker, we prioritized the need to protect the health and well-being of residents and communities ahead of the mandate we had set mere months before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020.

While government resources were mobilized to support our pandemic response, not only from a health perspective, but also a social and economic perspective, the regular business of government could not and did not stop because of the pandemic. We continued work on the 22 priorities outlined in the Mandate of the Government of the Northwest Territories. Some areas moved more quickly than others, but the work continued to be advanced. I am grateful for the many public servants who have supported this work over the last three years, your collective efforts and dedication will have lasting impacts on residents.

Mr. Speaker, people are our priority. As a government, we are focused on making sure all residents have what they need to thrive. This includes food, shelter, financial security and health care. The gaps we experience in the North were exacerbated by the pandemic, and it became evident that we needed a plan to move forward with our social and economic recovery post-pandemic that was complementary to the priorities outlined in the mandate. Emerging Stronger, our plan for social and economic recovery post-pandemic, is an extension of our mandate priorities and offers a roadmap for how we can address the gaps that the pandemic brought to the forefront. Mr. Speaker, we remain focused on advancing this work, along with the priorities outlined in the mandate. Since February, we have had a 6.9% increase in fulfilled commitments and I am confident we remain on track to meet most commitments, including delivering on our commitment to deliver 100 new housing units across the territory, the largest increase in new housing stock in decades. Over the course of this sitting, you will hear from Ministers about the work that continues to be done to bring stability and improved prosperity to residents and communities of the Northwest Territories.

As life began to return to a new post-pandemic normal earlier this year, the world was thrust into uncertainty when Russia invaded Ukraine, bringing with it geo-political instability that has had an impact on nations around the world, including Canada. Mr. Speaker, costs continue to rise and inflation in Canada reached a 40-year high this past summer. We know residents are feeling this in their pocketbooks as groceries, gasoline, home heating fuel increases continue to raise an already high cost of living for Northerners. It is having a particularly significant impact on middle and lower-class residents. Those living paycheck to paycheck or are on a fixed income like those living with disabilities or seniors, are having to make difficult decisions about which bills they can pay and still put food on the table each month.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize it is expensive to live in the Northwest Territories. We continue to do what we can for the most vulnerable residents during this difficult time.

As a result of this geopolitical instability, there has been a renewed focus on Arctic sovereignty and security.

As I have said before, northern security is not just about robust military presence. It is mostly about building strong, resilient communities through significant investment in critical infrastructure like roads, ports, telecommunications and energy. This was part of my message last week when I attended the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Global powers are moving fast to extend their influence and control in the Arctic through massive investments, increased marine traffic and partnerships to advance Arctic projects and positioning.

These countries are ramping up their Arctic presence and level of activity within their borders, and across the circumpolar world. Mr. Speaker, this is an effort to both secure opportunities for themselves and to influence the international rules and policies that will set the terms for what happens in the Arctic.

It is time for Canada to undertake bold new nation building projects in partnership with the territorial governments and Northern Indigenous governments that will allow all Canadians to benefit from the opportunities in the North. We want to be part of this work. Northerners need to be at the decision-making table, and I applaud Canada for its work with territorial governments and Indigenous leadership at regional and national tables for the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework.

Developed with all three Northern territories, the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework sets a roadmap to make the North stronger and more resilient through strategic investments to close the gaps between Canada and its Northern territories. Late last month, Cabinet met for three days with Indigenous leadership as part of the Council of Leaders table, and it was clear that increased funding is needed in the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Speaker, securing investments and support from federal partners on the priorities we have outlined in the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework is critical to our future success in the Northwest Territories, and to the future success of Canada.

We cannot continue to be an afterthought as a contributing part of Canada's economic future. If action is not taken now, we will be left behind as the federal government moves forward with its vision for a stronger Canada.

This past summer, Minister Wawzonek and I attended the Prospectors and Developers Association Conference in Toronto to meet with industry and other stakeholders to talk about the resource development opportunities that exist in the Northwest Territories. What struck me during our time there was the number of political leaders from all stripes in attendance, alongside Indigenous leaders from across Canada.

The geopolitical landscape is in turmoil, and given its unpredictable nature, it is likely to face instability like this in the future. The federal government sees this and their plan to deliver billions in funding to support the critical minerals sector bodes well for the Northwest Territories. We have a lot of opportunity to be a green energy leader in Canada.

However, to turn our critical mineral potential into a reality, we need the federal government to make good on large-scale investment. The federal government has committed to aligning Canada's electricity system with its climate goals of Net-Zero by 2035 and a recent report by the Canadian Climate Institute says significant changes are required to every aspect of the provincial and territorial power generation and distribution systems to meet the future demand. The Taltson Hydro Expansion can be a significant project that will advance Canada's clean energy goals.

Mr. Speaker, Canadians want to buy electric vehicles, but due to supply chain challenges they are waiting months and sometimes years to get one. Investment in infrastructure projects will play a significant role in the NWT's economic recovery, while also supporting national climate change goals, including significantly increasing the number of electric vehicles on Canadian roads.

By investing in large-scale projects like the Taltson Hydro Expansion, Mackenzie Valley Highway, and Slave Geological Corridor, it will bridge the substantial infrastructure gap that exists here in the NWT, kick-start the territory's economic recovery, and help improve access to the territory's critical mineral potential. When it comes to climate change, these types of investments are needed to help the NWT to mitigate and adapt to climate change and will also act as significant economic drivers for our territory.

For the NWT to meet our climate change mitigation and adaptation objectives, we need renewed energy, community and transportation infrastructure. We need to increase the use of alternative and renewable energies in a manner that is affordable, reliable, and sustainable. This cannot happen without the support of the federal government, investment is critical to achieving these goals.

This type of investment in the territory will bring with it economic prosperity. Residents want jobs. They want to be able to provide for their families, to be able to have a quality of life that gives them a better chance at success. By balancing our social investments with the need for economic well-being, we are setting residents up for a brighter future. We are in a unique position to build on the economic foundation that has provided so much to residents for many decades, while planning for a future where Northerners will have more educational and economic opportunities available to them.

The pandemic created many challenges for us, Mr. Speaker, but at the same time, it gave us the opportunity to look inward and begin to carve a new path forward for the Northwest Territories. It will take time, and will be part of the next government's work, but I am confident we are in a position where the hard work we have put in since coming into office in 2019 will pay off for generations to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.