

N.W.T. MLAs unite against cabinet to push childcare, reduced tax, highway shelters ^[1]

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Source: CBC News North

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Feb 2016

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Regular MLAs in the Northwest Territories teamed up against cabinet members this week to get a timeline for implementing universal child care, a lower small business tax and emergency highway shelters included in the territorial government's now-approved mandate for the next four years.

In short: the cabinet now has to do things it didn't support.

"It was regular MLAs working together to change a mandate that didn't reflect the priorities we ran on," said Kevin O'Reilly, the MLA for Frame Lake.

Members debated the initially proposed mandate for the first time in the legislative assembly's history this past week, with regular MLAs seizing on several opportunities to turn vaguely-worded passages into concrete promises.

Julie Green, the MLA for Yellowknife Centre, wanted a section originally calling on cabinet to "develop options for universal daycare" to instead require "an action plan for universal daycare within the next two years, including a timeline for implementation."

"I understand that the road to Whatì is going into the Wek'eezhii Valley Land and Water Board for permitting without any money to build it, so surely creating a plan to implement daycare, and a timeline for it, is no more outlandish a use of time and resources by the government," said Green.

Cabinet members abstained from that vote, paving the way for regular MLAs to push the issue through.

Reducing taxes on small businesses

But on several other hot-button issues, a more openly divisive scenario — unified regular MLAs voting yay, outnumbered cabinet ministers voting nay — repeatedly played itself out.

Kieron Testart, the MLA for Kam Lake, successfully added a promise to reduce taxes on small businesses.

Robert C. McLeod, the minister of Finance, said a one-per-cent reduction would result in \$700,000 in lost revenue — money the government uses to fund programs and services already in danger of cuts.

"This reduction would not cause anyone to start a small business," said McLeod.

"As a small business owner, I'll find myself in support of the motion," said Cory Vanthuyne, the MLA for Yellowknife North. "More and more we're seeing in the North small businesses are seeing growing overheads."

People could die

The starkest illustration of the house divide came during discussion of Nahendeh MLA Shane Thompson's proposal to build new emergency shelters for people travelling on the territory's remote highways.

"People could die from exposure after breaking down on the highways," said Thompson. "In some of the remote highways... the cell service does not work."

"Our family has a much better piece of mind travelling along those roads and seeing emergency shelters, knowing that if we ever had to use them, they were actually there and available," echoed O'Reilly.

Premier Bob McLeod, who's also the minister of Industry, Tourism and Investment, said his department has added new pull-outs (spaced out at every 50 kilometres) and improved existing ones.

McLeod cited costs and "limited demand" as factors in his department's having had no plans to build shelters.

"We have had emergency shelters and it promoted vandalism and other misuse of the shelters," said McLeod. "And we have had experiences with our toilet facilities."

McLeod moved to have Thompson's shelter amendment effectively neutralized, but was defeated by regular MLAs, who then voted against cabinet to have shelters successfully added to the mandate.

'Hope we're not setting ourselves up for failure'

Regular MLAs also banded together to ensure the government must now develop legislation within two years to set up an independent ombudsman office.

Premier Bob McLeod pointed out that a previous estimate put the cost of running such an office at more than \$500,000 a year.

Frederick Blake Jr., who represents the Mackenzie Delta and who voted positively on the childcare, business tax, shelter and ombudsman issues, may as well have been speaking for fiscally-concerned cabinet members during the debate on the ombudsman issue.

"I hope we're not setting ourselves up for failure with a lot of the changes we're making to the mandate," said Blake.

"[With] a lot of them, the intention means well, but we have to realize a lot of this is going to cost money and in our current situation here, it's going to be challenging for us to fulfill our mandate...unless things turn around."

-reprinted from CBC News North

Region: Northwest Territories ^[3]

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