

Minister's Statement 30-14(4): Sessional Statement

HON. STEPHEN KAKFWI: *Mr. Speaker, today as we gather again as an Assembly, I would like to extend my deepest condolences, on behalf of all Members of the Legislative Assembly, to the families and friends of those killed in the plane crash near Fort Liard one week ago. We are all too familiar with the human price that our northern environment can exact. We each share in the sense of loss that exists today in the Deh Cho. I am confident that the people of Fort Liard will come together in the wake of the tragedy that has hit their community.*

It is our nature as northern people to unite to face challenges. It is something that I would call on each Member of this Assembly to do today as we prepare to address the future of our Territory and our people. It is almost two years since we first came together as an Assembly and then presented to the people of the Northwest Territories our vision of a better tomorrow. Our vision reflects the common belief that each and every Member of this Assembly that Northerners must benefit from economic and social development in their regions and that we will pursue this development in the interest of the people we represent.

Two things have happened recently that impact on our agenda. First, the tragic events and consequences of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. have touched all of our lives. The events of September 11th have and will continue to have a profound affect on the way we live even in our remote northern communities. Tougher airport security measures are an example. Last week in Ottawa, I met with United States Ambassador Cellucci and conveyed to him the sentiments and support of all Northwest Territories residents in the aftermath of the New York City and Washington attacks. Secondly, we are experiencing an economic downturn which, with few exceptions, is beginning to impact most of Canada, including the Northwest Territories. Now more than ever we as an Assembly must stand united in our purpose and not lose sight of our collective vision. I urge all Members to stay the course and complete the agenda that we have laid out together.

This tragedy has significantly altered the federal government's agenda because it must now take into account the increased focus and spending on national security measures and international defiance obligations. Last week, I also met with a number of federal Ministers, urging them to ensure that Northwest Territories and aboriginal issues continue to be part of the federal government's national agenda. I was assured that opportunities presented by the Northwest Territories are still on the federal government's agenda. This should be a source of great encouragement for us all.

Coupled with this assurance, there are a number of positive developments that are worth noting:

- *Despite recent developments, the Northwest Territories economy has remained strong, primarily because of gas exploration and diamond mine development.*
- *On October 15th, the Mackenzie Delta Producers Group signed the Aboriginal Pipeline Group's Memorandum of Understanding, giving aboriginal equity in a pipeline the legitimacy it needs to move forward. Through the MOU, the APG is now well positioned to work with Mackenzie Delta Producers in advancing Northwest Territories aboriginal interests in a proposed pipeline project. This partnership is especially representative of many that have been developed*

between southern industries and Northwest Territories aboriginal development corporations and businesses.

- The diamond mine industry has begun to pay royalties to*
- Ottawa. These payments will only increase in future years, highlighting the need for a resource revenue sharing and devolution agreement. Negotiations are set to begin in the new year.*
- A Beaufort-Delta Self-Government Agreement-in-Principle is another concrete achievement. Aboriginal self-government has been a priority of this House for the last three decades. The process of change can formally begin in this region.*

As we begin this session today, Mr. Speaker, it is important that we know where we stand. Existing gas exploration commitments totaling close to one billion dollars, continued investment in Diavik and investment in a third diamond mine are good signs of strong economic growth for the Northwest Territories.

However, our fiscal situation has changed in the past few months and will face further challenges. We expect that Ottawa's spending priorities will address security and defence considerations, resulting in less investment dollars for the Northwest Territories. Within the next decade, the Northwest Territories will be paying more into federal coffers than it receives, yet in the short term, the new federal focus may mean fewer dollars for the Northwest Territories. Mr. Handley will be providing you with a more detailed account of our changing fiscal situation shortly. Meanwhile, our political environment has become charged in recent months by the government's highway investment plan. It has been a long time since one issue has captured the attention of so many Northwest Territories residents.

Mr. Speaker, I look forward to receiving the standing committee's report and to a productive debate on the options available to us and the consequences of these options, particularly for consumers, business and industry.

In light of all of the national and international development and uncertainty, we as a government must decide how to proceed over the remainder of our mandate. Obviously, our response to these challenges must always be guided by our goals as set out in Towards a Better Tomorrow and we should not react without good information. We should have a better idea of how these internal and external factors will impact our Territory and how we should adapt our strategies and actions by the time our next budget is presented in February 2002. It is important for us to stay the course and to ensure that on those agenda initiatives which require immediate attention and over which we have jurisdiction, we make the decisions in support of our vision.

One of these initiatives, with significant revenue and infrastructure implications, is the highway investment plan. The basis of this plan is investment now to provide returns for NWT consumers who want better and safer roads, for NWT businesses which will benefit directly and indirectly from a modern highway system, and for industry, including that based in the NWT, which will profit from the development of our northern resources.

Mr. Speaker, as a key element in our vision of a better tomorrow, the government is advocating that this House supports the highway investment plan.

There are also a number of other investment measures that will advance our collective agenda and which need the support of Members. Members will be asked to pass a bill to approve expenditures for the development of an NWT energy strategy, the completion of our social agenda framework, furthering the work of the Intergovernmental Forum in resource revenue sharing and devolution. Much of this investment will flow to aboriginal governments, community consultations and the non-government sector.

As we return to work in this House, Mr. Speaker, it is imperative that we consider what needs to be done to complete our mandate. I indicated to my colleagues at the start of the recent business plan review process that the next 18 months will require the commitment and joint action of both the government and the Assembly.

My Cabinet colleagues and I will continue to share information and be available to discuss issues with individual Members, committees and the public -- but we must do more than that. I am pleased to note, Mr. Speaker, that House Leader Joe Handley and Caucus chairs Bill Braden and Steve Nitah are working to develop a legislative priorities package. I am also pleased that we are planning to meet as a Caucus to discuss priorities for the remainder of our term. I have asked Mr. Handley to work with Mr. Braden and Mr. Nitah to provide options for us all to consider at that meeting. Mr. Speaker, we have some difficult issues to resolve during this session. Some of these decisions will be difficult and may not be popular but are necessary if we are to fulfill our vision of a better tomorrow for all people in the NWT.

Whatever the solution, Members have our assurances that the focus of this government is to work with all Members of this House to lay the foundation for the next two years and to complete the agenda we began together -- our joint vision of a better tomorrow for our people.

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