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**The Honourable Shane Thompson, Speaker**

# Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories

## Members of the Legislative Assembly

### Speaker

**Hon. Shane Thompson**  
(Nahendeh)

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**Hon. Caitlin Cleveland**

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Employment*  
*Minister of Industry, Tourism and  
Investment*

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(Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh)

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(Yellowknife Centre)

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*Government House Leader*  
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(Range Lake)

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(Yellowknife South)  
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**Armstrong**

(Monfwi)

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(Dehcho)

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Box 1320

Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

Tel: (867) 767-9010 Fax: (867) 920-4735 Toll-Free: 1-800-661-0784

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**YELLOWKNIFE, NORTHWEST TERRITORIES****Thursday, February 22, 2024****Members Present**

Hon. Caitlin Cleveland, Mr. Edjericon, Mr. Hawkins, Hon. Lucy Kuptana, Hon. Jay MacDonald, Hon. Vince McKay, Mr. McNeely, Ms. Morgan, Mr. Morse, Mr. Nerysoo, Ms. Reid, Hon. Lesa Semmler, Hon. R.J. Simpson, Mr. Testart, Mr. Thompson, Mrs. Weyallon Armstrong, Mrs. Yakelaya

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

**Prayer**

---Prayer

**SPEAKER (Hon. Shane Thompson):** I'd like to thank Mary Jane Cazon for the opening blessing here.

Members, before we begin, I would like to welcome the Honourable Jenna Sudds Minister of Family, Children, and Social Development to the Legislative Assembly. I would also like to welcome back to the Assembly our MP Michael McLeod, a Member of the 14th, 15th, and 16th Assembly as well as a former Minister in two Assemblies. And he was my Minister and my boss, so. As well, my former colleague in the 18th and 19th Assembly, Mr. Kevin O'Reilly was my -- sat beside each other for four years, and he asked a whole bunch of questions in the 19th. So all, welcome to the Assembly.

On a serious note, colleagues, yesterday something happened that I was not happy with. I had to read at 8 o'clock last night that somebody had a birthday and didn't tell us about it and didn't allow us to recognize them in this House. You know, I'm very disappointed that this had to happen so therefore I am going to do a belated Happy Birthday to our clerk Mr. Glen Rutland. Happy Birthday. Thank you.

Ministers' statements. Minister for Education, Culture and Employment.

**Ministers' Statements**

MINISTER'S STATEMENT 17-20(1):  
REACHING AVERAGE \$10 A DAY CHILD  
CARE IN THE NWT

**HON. CAITLIN CLEVELAND:** Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. The Government of the Northwest Territories made a mandate commitment in 2019 to advance universal child care by increasing availability and affordability. It is my great privilege today to announce that starting April 1st, licensed child care in the Northwest Territories will cost an average of \$10 a day. This change will mean families can focus on

caring for their children without the financial pressures of high child care costs. For example, a family with an infant and a preschooler in licensed care will save approximately \$18,000 per year. That money can now put meals on the table, winter clothing on children, and help families with the costs of everyday life while providing access to quality care.

This milestone, reached two years ahead of schedule, is calculated by combining free programs and those that charge fees. It means that while some families may pay more than \$10 a day, others may pay less than \$10 a day. But on average though, licensed child care fees across our territory will be \$10 a day.

Mr. Speaker, while this is exciting news for families, affordability is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to a sustainable and mature child care sector. Beyond affordability, we are focused on accessibility, improved inclusion supports, and retention and recruitment of early childhood educators. Supporting the development of necessary infrastructure, whether that is a new building or a renovated space, is pivotal to reducing wait lists and supporting parents to re-enter the workforce or further their education when they are ready. The GNWT currently has a \$1 million annual budget for infrastructure for early learning and child care programs but we know this is not enough to meet demand. I am pleased to share that we are, at the point, negotiating new child care infrastructure dollars for the NWT with the Government of Canada, and I look forward to sharing more details in the coming months.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot stress enough that without early childhood educators, whether they are working in family day homes, centres, or after-school programs, our child care system would simply not exist. Early childhood educators deserve to be paid appropriately for the work they do. Over the last two years, the Government of the Northwest Territories and the Government of Canada have invested approximately \$4.6 million in wage top-ups for early childhood educators at NWT centres. However, that funding was always meant to be transitional.

We are currently engaging with the sector on what comes next: A wage grid, a certification model, and new funding approaches to support licensed operators. A wage grid will establish a minimum hourly pay rate for these positions so that no one earns below that threshold. It also means that years of experience and education will be recognized.

Mr. Speaker, the last few years have included a lot of change and engagement, and we are not done yet. The GNWT will continue to engage with Indigenous governments and community partners, including the NWT Early Childhood Association. I am pleased to share that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and the association recently formalized this relationship through the co-development of a terms of reference to support understanding of work going forward to achieve shared objectives.

Mr. Speaker, in reaching an average \$10-a-day child care in the Northwest Territories, we have reached one of our goals, and I look forward to the work ahead to accomplish those that remain. I want to thank early childhood educators from across the territory who continue to support this critical sector and provide us with their feedback to improve it. I am committed to continuing this work and I am thankful that so many other Northerners are as well. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. Members' statements. Member from Yellowknife Centre.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I MOVE, seconded by the honourable Member for Kam Lake, that the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment, the Minister's statement called Reaching Average \$10- a-day Child Care in the NWT be referred to Committee of the Whole for further consideration. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** The Minister's statement will be moved into the Committee of the Whole.

---Carried

Ministers' statements. Member from Range Lake.

**MR. TESTART:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I seek unanimous consent to move to item 16 on the orders of the day. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Range Lake is seeking unanimous consent to move item 16 to this order of the day. Any nays? No nays. Member, we'll move to section -- movement 16.

## Motions

### MOTION 9-20(1): ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THE 2023 WILDFIRES, CARRIED

**MR. SPEAKER:** Members, we are now resuming debate on Motion 9-20(1), Establishing a Public Inquiry into the 2023 Fires.

On February 9th, 2024, Member from Range Lake moved Motion 9-20(1). The Honourable Premier moved the debate on the motion be postponed to February 22nd, 2024. The question is whether or not the Legislative Assembly resolved that the Commissioner cause an inquiry to be made into the 2023 wildfire. The motion is in order. To the motion. Member from Range Lake.

**MR. TESTART:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I want to take a moment to speak to how we got here today as we prepare to consider this motion.

We are here today for talking about a public inquiry because we need to restore the public's trust. We know all too well that political engagement in the Northwest Territories can be fleeting, but the idea of a public inquiry has inspired many who hope to participate and share their experiences. We need to meet this moment. We need to send a message to the public that we take them seriously and we're ready to engage with them.

I have heard the argument that this public inquiry will result in too much blame and criticism without offering much insight to the government, to the public, or to this Assembly. To that, I say this perspective is a gross underestimation of the contribution the public has to offer and the independence a public inquiry can offer.

The people of the Northwest Territories lived through the crisis. Many worked to support their family, friends, and neighbours to get through it. Their knowledge is crucial if we want to move forward and prepare for the future, and their trust is key if we want to work together through the next crisis. The public's trust that natural disasters be managed by their government has been shaken by this event as has the trust of national partners, community organizations and, in particular, Indigenous governments. The fact that thousands of people were left on their own accord as the fires approached shows that much trust wasn't there to begin with. Shortly thereafter, the Yellowknife Airport here for our evacuation began to overflow, and the

GNWT still told people to remain in place right up until the moment they told everyone to leave.

Nobody knew there was a plan to evacuate, especially if fires closed down the highway or heavy smoke prevented flights from taking off. In addition, the capital city is the most important supply hub for the Northwest Territories. Other communities feared that they would not get their groceries they'd need to feed their communities, fuel and other essential supplies. They did not know how long these disruptions would take place, and cooperation between Indigenous governments and the GNWT was severely strained. Sitting in hotel rooms down south, some days the government and its representatives were all too quiet for evacuees to handle. Then some days they were announcing plans and programs that did not make sense or seemed inadequate or contradictory. Social media was flooded with questions and speculation that often went unanswered. Who can apply for this assistance? Is my property safe and secure back home? When will I be allowed back into my community? What will I even be returning to?

Then, of course, there is the financial costs to individuals and communities. I spoke with many constituents during the last election who were out thousands of dollars. Many of those are still waiting for their government relief money to come in with numerous files for the Minister of Finance right now that we're working on fulfilling. These people are paying interest on high credit card bills at a time when our cost of living is very high and our costs continue to rise.

It will take years to recover, and at a time when our citizens are already trying to get over the effects of a multi-year global pandemic and the inflationary pressures that it's left in its wake. Communities that did not evacuate incurred costs as well that have not been compensated for. Any community that had to take in evacuees and prepare for fires of their own should not have to bear these costs alone.

The impact of last year's wildfire season remains inescapable. The event still hangs over communities. I am hopeful that as communities we can continue to work together to support each other, but the work of friends and neighbours can only go so far. Here in this House, we have a lot of work to do to restore public trust, Mr. Speaker, and prepare for the future. So I can say now is the time to get that work done and pass this public inquiry.

Mr. Speaker, I do want to speak to what is -- I've spoken why we need an inquiry, to restore trust in the public and to take stock of a very significant event, the largest Canadian airlift

in -- or the largest airlift in our country's history, two-thirds of the population displaced as climate refugees, community burnt nearly to the ground. If this isn't grounds for a public inquiry, I don't know what is.

And, Mr. Speaker, why, though, a public inquiry? What is a public inquiry? And, fundamentally, it is an independent transparent and accountable process. We looked for legislative tools to get us the best result for the public who are concerned and that would get results and the best recommendations, and the one we found was in the Public Inquiries Act. And we still feel very strongly, those who are in support of this motion, that this is the right way to go.

With no disrespect to the very hardworking public servants who are managing after-action reviews and did a very tough job in very difficult circumstances, a fully independent arm's length process cannot be in the government's hands. It can't even have the government's fingerprints on it. There is trust concerns in the Northwest Territories. There are people who feel they cannot speak to their MLAs sometimes without full anonymity. And if we can't hear from our constituents, if they don't feel protected to send us an e-mail, what is the likelihood that they're going to feel comfortable sending in comments or stories or experiences to a report that is commissioned through the Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs? I think it's unlikely we're going to get to the same level of engagement and the same level of outcomes.

Furthermore, the work of a contractor is going to take place behind closed doors. That's just how it works. They'll have public engagement sessions. We know the government is proposing quite an ambitious schedule of public engagement sessions, but the work is not going to be transparent. A work of a commission would be.

Furthermore, the work of a commission could be undertaken by Northerners who understand the North, who understand the communities, and know the unique sensitivities and realities of working and living in the North and were also affected by this event. And that's a perspective that will not be shared by a hired firm from presumably the southern part of the country.

Mr. Speaker, and that's why we're proposing this approach. And this approach is not going to be something, with all due respect to my honourable friend the Premier, something that will cost tens of millions of dollars and something that will require hundreds of thousands of witnesses and grind government to a halt. We can confine the scope, the costs, and the timelines of a public inquiry through a

very well-constructed inquiry establishment order. And that is what this motion calls to do, a collaborative process between the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight and the Cabinet in building something that both sides are comfortable with and that keeps -- that prevents this from spiraling out of control. Because it's true, an independent commission has a lot of power to be independent, but we can make the right calls. We can make the right calls on how it's shaped. We can modify the process for accepting testimony that protects witnesses and allows for private testimony to be given, just like we've seen in other commissions. We can, again, set a very clear budget, a reasonable budget, that can ensure the maximum amount of public engagement and expertise that the board of inquiry would need to complete this work, and we can make sure that they report back at a specific time. This is not something that just you launch like a ship, and it sails off to a new continent. This is something that we can constrain.

And furthermore, we can make it consider after-action reports or any other reports that the government's working on right now. We can make it consider debriefings the departments have had internally. The inquiry can take into account all of these things and other things that we think are relevant. And that's important as well because we're not duplicating effort. You know, we're building on what the GNWT is already working on and building it into an arm's length public process that's completely independent of government and therefore will have that element of restoring trust and restoring confidence that this is not a whitewash report.

This is not something that has been a draft has been poured over by Cabinet and offensive sections taken out and, you know, things like that that we hear from the community. And I'm not suggesting that that's going to happen. You know, I would be inappropriate to do so in this Chamber or in any other venue. You know, we trust in our leaders. We put them there to lead. But this is a difference of opinion on how to proceed. You know, this isn't a personality dispute. This isn't about anyone's integrity. This is about what process is best for the Northwest Territories.

You know, and another thing we can do with that establishment order is ensure that Indigenous governments and Indigenous peoples are given a main stage in the process and craft it to ensure that their perspectives and their rights and treaties are respected and taken into account. We've had discussions about that and, you know, we want to improve this process in the Inquiries Act to ensure that Indigenous

nations are well represented in that. And we haven't been doing this alone.

We've been working as an entire Assembly to have these conversations. You know, the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight has met with Cabinet in full and discussed concerns on how we -- concerns on both sides how we can move forward. I had met with the Premier and the Minister -- the Ministers responsible for wildfire prevention and emergency management in the Northwest Territories. This is all part of the process of building a compromise that can work for everyone because at the end of the day, we serve the public, and the public wants to see us work together. The public wants to see us meet their expectations, their very high expectations of restoring trust after a very traumatic episode in our shared history. And I believe we have been working earnestly to achieve that. But there is a dispute, and that's a healthy dispute. We're not sent here to agree to all agree with each other. It's not unanimous government, Mr. Speaker. It's consensus government. And when we have these kinds of disputes, it's only right we bring them to the floor and speak to why we feel strongly about something on one side or the other. And I really appreciate the level of maturity and professionalism that every Member has shown in discussing this motion and a public inquiry.

And furthermore, to the media, to the public, to the experts who have been brought in to weigh in on this, I think people -- Northerners are more aware of what a public inquiry is and what our legislation does than they've ever been in any period in the Northwest Territories' history before, and I think that's a good thing. I think people know what the stakes are, you know. I trust -- I have full trust that people watching our proceedings and who have been paying attention to the reporting in the media are well aware of what this entails and what it could be and what it isn't. Yes, there's still some concerns but I'm confident we can work through them and that the correct way to handle this is with a full public inquiry that ensures, again, independence, transparency, and accountability that is completely arm's length from government, because fundamentally a trust has been broken. And if we are not ready to meet the moment and restore that trust, we're going to start this Assembly off on bad footing.

So I hope that Members will support this motion and that we will move forward in collaboration with all parties to draft an establishment order that will meet the expectations -- the very high expectations of Northerners, give them the answers they're looking for, and ensure that that process has a hundred percent integrity



that cannot be impugned by anyone looking from the outside in. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Range Lake. To the motion. Great Slave.

To the motion. Great Slave.

**MS. REID:** Just making sure I'm procedurally correct, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When I was elected, I got a strong sense from the residents of my riding that they wanted to see someone represent them who would make collaboration their main mode of operation. They wanted someone who would listen to them as residents but also someone who would listen to all Members of the Assembly. That baseline expectation is what I strive to live up to every day that I have the privilege to stand here and proudly represent my riding. I have heard from constituents on both sides of the public inquiry argument. Some see a public inquiry as the only way forward. Others have cautioned, like the Premier, to the expense of what a public inquiry might entail.

The most poignant request that was shared with me was a detailed account from the perspective of a redeployed GNWT employee. They worked at an evacuation centre and provided me with several pages of issues that they flagged from that experience. I have shared this account on an anonymous basis with all Members in this House well before this motion came to the floor. I did this in the spirit of collaboration to spark a conversation about what a scope could or should entail, and I was told in so many words that I was putting the cart before the horse and, in some ways, I was. But I still think that that conversation should have happened with all 19 of us and that it would have led to some conversations earlier on about what the best container looked like collaboratively. But that did not come to pass.

After conferring with my colleagues and legal staff in the past two weeks, I can say that the Public Inquiries Act affords, through regulation, everything that residents want to see - constraints to timelines, budgets and, especially important to me, the ability to provide for anonymity when requested.

The people in the NWT deserve to know exactly what the GNWT did to fight last summer's fires and what it did to plan for and support all the people displaced from their homes and communities. And more importantly, the people deserve to find out why the GNWT made the decisions that it did, particularly the decisions of Ministers and senior officials in charge. An independent review of staff actions may tell part of the story, but the more important story lies in

finding out on what those staff were told to do in the first place. However, to see what we want, the scope will remain the crucial part of the conversation that I was so eager to have. This means that we need strong terms of reference for the inquiry. I hope that all 19 of us together can collaborate meaningfully on that piece together.

Unfortunately, right after the deferral two weeks ago, the Premier told the media that a public inquiry is not the way to go effectively signaling that meaningful collaboration with all Members, that I thought I was voting for through deferral of the motion, was dead in the water. And although it is certain that this motion will pass today, adding to dashed hopes Cabinet is not compelled to do what we request in the motion. Others may infer meaning behind that choice but, ultimately to me, it comes down to this: It's kind of depressing that the government needs to be convinced to do the right thing and, ultimately, it feels likely they won't, even now. It diminishes the trust in the GNWT further. Cabinet had an amazing opportunity to make a strong gesture of good faith and prove that they were not going to make things business as usual, but that boat seems to have sailed.

I'm going to get a little technical, Mr. Speaker. The Legislative Assembly and Executive Council Act obligates MLAs to perform their duties of office and arrange their affairs in such a manner as to maintain public confidence and trust in the integrity, objectivity, and impartiality of the Member and to act in a manner that will bear the closest public scrutiny in all other respects. This obligation exists because public trust is at the heart of good government. Members must always strive to maintain that trust.

The thing about trust is that the person who wants to earn it doesn't always get to define when they have done enough to be trusted. Maybe the government can be trusted to investigate its own actions last summer but however thorough and complete its review, there are sure to be doubts, particularly among those who are most directly affected by the fires. Cabinet could take those doubts right off the table right now and earn a whole lot of public trust and respect by agreeing to launch a public inquiry.

We have reached a critical decision point only a hundred days into our time as Members that now sets the tone for how we work together as an Assembly. We can decide to send the message that this government will stand for truth, transparency and integrity, and that it is committed to partnership and collaboration with all Members. If we decide otherwise, it will leave a question mark hanging over us about our

ability to move forward together. I will continue to push for all 19 of us to have collaboration as our preferred mode of operation. I'll always ask for that collaboration and ask for it to be meaningful.

One last thing I'll say and then I'm done. Trust is not something that is found or restored; it has to be earned every day. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Great Slave. To the motion. Member from Monfwi.

MOTION TO AMEND MOTION 9-20(1):  
ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO  
THE 2023 WILDFIRES - INCREASE BOARD  
TO 6 PERSONS,  
CARRIED

**MRS. WEYALLON ARMSTRONG:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now a motion to amend -- sorry about that, I apologize.

NOW THEREFORE I MOVE, seconded by the Member for Sahtu, to amend Motion 9-20(1), Establishing a Public Inquiry into the 2023 Wildfires by replacing the word "four" with the word "six" in the second clause such as it reads:

AND FURTHER, that this resolution include the Commissioner establishing a board composed of six persons appointed by the Commissioner to make the inquiry and to report on the inquiry to the Commissioner.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Monfwi. The motion to amend Motion 9-20(1) is in order. The question before the House is now the amendment. Debate must be on the amendment and not to the main motion. To the motion. Member from Monfwi.

**MRS. WEYALLON ARMSTRONG:** Mr. Speaker, the wildfire 2023 had a great impact on a lot of people in the Northwest Territories and especially in my region, in Tlicho region. And a lot of people have been coming forward wants to be -- they want to be heard. Mr. Speaker, we cannot forget 4 million hectares of land burned --

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Monfwi, to the amendment. To the amendment. Thank you. Yes, thank you, Member; it's all right, we're all learning. Thank you. To the motion. Member from Range Lake.

**MR. TESTART:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, this amendment will allow for the Council of Leaders, which is made up of Indigenous governments, to appoint two

persons to a board of inquiry to oversee the public inquiry as contemplated by this motion. And I consider it a friendly amendment and support it. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** To the motion.

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Question.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Question has been called. Motion to amend Motion 9-20. Premier.

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Cabinet will be abstaining from any amendments, or the amendments that we have been made aware of, and reserve the vote until the final motion that committee wants to bring forward is put together. I understand there may be a number of amendments and so we'll be abstaining on all of them. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Yellowknife Centre.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I think I was part of that earlier confusion. I thank the Member for Monfwi for moving the amended motion obviously and the Member for Range Lake for clarifying what it is, the intent of the amendment. That said, it's already been explained on the record so there's no sense in repeating what it was, but I want to further underscore I think the Members would like a recorded vote in this amendment process so therefore I'll formally ask for it. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Yellowknife Centre has asked for a recorded vote. All those in favour? Recorded vote. Please stand.

#### RECORDED VOTE

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** The Member for Monfwi. The Member for Frame Lake. The Member for Great Slave. The Member for Mackenzie Delta. The Member for Yellowknife North. The Member for Tu Nedhe-Willideh. The Member for Deh Cho. The Member for Sahtu. The Member for Yellowknife Centre. The Member for Range Lake.

**MR. SPEAKER:** All those opposed? All those abstaining?

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** The Member from Thebacha. The Member for Kam Lake. The Member for Hay River North. The Member for Hay River South. The Member for Inuvik Twin Lakes. The Member for Nunakput.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Colleagues, motion 10 yeases. 0 nos. And 6 abstentions. Motion has been carried.

---Carried

Members, returning back to the Motion 9-20(1) as amended. To the motion as amended. Member for Monfwi.

MOTION TO AMEND MOTION 9-20(1):  
 ,, ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO  
 THE 2023 WILDFIRES – COUNCIL OF  
 LEADERS,  
 CARRIED

**MRS. WEYALLON ARMSTRONG:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

NOW THEREFORE I MOVE, seconded by the Member for Sahtu, to amend Motion 9-20(1): Establishing a Public Inquiry into the 2023 Wildfires as amended, by adding the following clause after the fourth clause:

AND FURTHERMORE, that the Commissioner receive recommendations from the Council of Leaders for two persons to be appointed to the board.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member for Monfwi. Members, there's a motion to amend Motion 9-20(1) as amended. The question before the House is proposed amendments. Debate should be on the proposed amendment, not the main motion. To the motion. Member for Monfwi.

**MRS. WEYALLON ARMSTRONG:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the reason why this motion is introduced is to appoint -- the Council of Leaders to appoint two board members to the inquiry. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you. To the motion. Member from Yellowknife Centre.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First off, I'm going to ask for a recorded vote to make sure that doesn't get forgotten.

The next part is part of the -- I just want to further elaborate on the amendment made by my colleague from Monfwi. The issue is this side of the House is trying to make this the most collaborative process as possible, and we want to work with Council of Leaders. We believe the Indigenous governments do have a role to play on the guidance of this inquiry, and we think it would be strengthened by their vision and input on it. So the Members aren't doing this in isolation so the House may be able to count every single one here showing their support. But that said, I want people to know is we've reached well beyond our ranks in this House to get into the communities to speak to the chiefs, to speak to folks and families who have been impacted by this, so that's, you know, part of the underlying reason of this amendment to ensure

that we're demonstrating, we're reaching very far and collaboratively to make it a good process. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Yellowknife Centre. To the motion.

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Question.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Question has been called. And ask for a recorded vote. So question has been called for the Motion to Amend Motion 9-20(1) as amended, and it is a recorded vote. All those in favour?

#### RECORDED VOTE

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** The Member for Monfwi. The Member for Frame Lake. The Member for Great Slave. The Member for Mackenzie Delta. The Member for Yellowknife North. The Member for Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh. The Member for Deh Cho. The Member for Sahtu. The Member for Yellowknife Centre. The Member for Range Lake.

**MR. SPEAKER:** All those opposed? All those abstaining?

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** The Member for Thebacha. The Member for Kam Lake. The Member for Hay River North. The Member for Hay River South. The Member for Inuvik Twin Lakes. The Member for Nunakput.

**MR. SPEAKER:** In favour, 10. Opposed, 0. Abstention, 6. Motion has been carried.

---Carried

Returning back to Motion 9-20(1) as amended. To the motion. Member from Frame Lake.

MOTION TO AMEND MOTION 9-20(1):  
 ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO  
 THE 2023 WILDFIRES – REDUCE BOARD  
 TO THREE PERSONS,  
 CARRIED

**MR. MORSE:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

NOW THEREFORE I MOVE, seconded by the Member for Great Slave, to amend Motion 9-20(1), Establishment of a Public Inquiry into the 2023 Wildfires as amended, by replacing the word "six" with "three" in the second clause such that the clause reads:

AND FURTHER, that this resolution includes the Commissioner establishing a board composed of three persons appointed by the Commissioner to make the inquiry and to report on the inquiry to the Commissioner;

And further, that the words "two persons" are changed to "one person" in the third, fourth, and fifth clauses such as the clauses read "for one person to be appointed to the board."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Frame Lake. Members, there's a motion to amend Motion 9-20(1) as amended. The question before the House is the proposed amendment. Debate is on the proposed amendment and not the main motion. To the motion. Member from Frame Lake.

**MR. MORSE:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. By way of explanation, this is just an addition to the friendly amendments made by the Member for Monfwi. It was my feeling that a six-person board is getting quite large at that point and so a three Member panel would be more appropriate. It would be more cost conscious and so that's why I made this what I consider to be a friendly amendment. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Frame Lake. To the motion.

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Question.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Question has been called. All those in favour? Opposed? Abstained? Motion has been passed.

---Carried

Returning to the motion. Member from the Deh Cho.

MOTION TO AMEND MOTION 9-20(1):  
ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO  
THE 2023 WILDFIRES – DRAFT INQUIRY  
ESTABLISHMENT ORDER,  
CARRIED

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I MOVE, second by the Member for Great Slave, to amend Motion 9-20(1), Establishing a Public Inquiry into the 2023 Wildfires as amended, by replacing the words "the inquiry establishment order" with "a draft inquiry establishment order" in the last clause of the motion such as it reads:

AND FURTHERMORE, that a draft inquiry establishment order be tabled on the first day of the May sitting of this House.

Thank You, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from the Deh Cho. Members, there's a motion to amend Motion 9-20(1) as amended. The question before the House is the proposed amendment.

Debate on the amendment and not the main motion. To the motion. Member from the Deh Cho.

All those in favour? Opposed? Abstention?

---Carried

The motion has been passed.

To the motion. Member for Great Slave.

MOTION TO AMEND MOTION 9-20(1):  
ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO  
THE 2023 WILDFIRES – SAFE  
DISCLOSURE,  
CARRIED

**MS. REID:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I MOVE, seconded by the Member for Deh Cho, to amend Motion 9-20(1), Establishing a Public Inquiry into the 2023 Wildfires as amended, by adding the following clause after the fifth clause:

AND FURTHERMORE, that the Commissioner recommend to the board that they establish safe disclosure opportunities for people to share information with the inquiry.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Great Slave. To the motion. Member from Great Slave.

**MS. REID:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to elaborate a bit on this amendment. It is very important to me that folks who were in the public service at the time of the evacuation be afforded opportunities to provide their feedback anonymously, and I thank my colleagues on this side of the House for appreciating this amendment to the motion. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Great Slave. To the motion.

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Question.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Question has been called. All those in favour? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion has been carried.

---Carried

Any debate on the wildfire motion. The Member from Monfwi.

**MRS. WEYALLON ARMSTRONG:** Yes, thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, this wildfire 2023 had a great impact on a lot of people in the Northwest Territories, especially in my region.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot forget that 4 million hectares of land burned in the Northwest Territories. That is our way of life - our food, our medicine, our language. And we can't forget around that time animal babies -- small animal babies were also burned as well. For the first time, Behchoko and Wekweeti were evacuated. This happened so fast for many of my people that many were frightened. Many didn't know what to do or where to go because it happened so fast. And there was no communication with the people. In this whole process, vulnerable people, especially the elderly who were caught in the evacuation that were in Yellowknife, some of them went south without interpreters and some of the vulnerable people on the street, some of them did not return to Yellowknife or did not return to the North to their communities. So they are missing.

So we have to remember all the things that happened with 2023 wildfires. People want to be heard. They want to know what happened. We cannot forget. We cannot repeat. What happened, with fire 2023 what happened, we cannot let it repeat again.

In the whole process too, Mr. Speaker, none of the Indigenous government were consulted. They were not consulted. The GNWT had a lack of emergency coordination with the Indigenous government. For that reason, on August 28th, I introduced a private Member's bill, and that was to coordinate its emergency response activities with Indigenous government affected by the emergencies. And that is also related to the motion that we just introduced.

Twenty-eight communities were abandoned. The sad part, I just live down the road from here - a hundred kilometres, 104 kilometres. The Premier of the day drove by my community, did not even stop to talk to the leaders or to myself to see how the people are doing. Nothing like that. No communication. We have airstrips in my community. No plane was left behind for us to use, for people to use. Two fly-in communities were stuck for three weeks while the evacuation was in place. We had no groceries. We had no medicine. Medical travels were affected. We were cut off from Yellowknife when the fire was not near Yellowknife. So a lot of our people were going south to go get some groceries.

But the good thing out of the whole thing was because the evacuation happened so fast, the first weekend for a lot of people -- a lot of people in my communities are saying for the first weekend because the evacuation happened so fast with little notice, it was quiet in our community. No alcohol until people found ways, until they started going south to go get their groceries. So for many of our -- I've been talking

to a lot of people and I've been talking to Indigenous government. They are supportive of this inquiry, a public full independent inquiries of this wildfire 2023.

Tlicho government, they also support this as well. They send -- they're vocal, and they're vocal about this because they did their own press release to support the public inquiries. And we know that we cannot move forward. We cannot move forward without the Indigenous government. So this motion to -- this motion will provide a full participation of the Indigenous government to review the process, and it is supported by Tlicho government and other Indigenous government as well.

So therefore, at this time, I am asking my colleagues to support the wishes of the Indigenous government to recognize the impact this wildfire had on Indigenous communities and to ensure equal participants in the review process. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Monfwi. To the motion. Member from Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh.

**MR. EDJERICON:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to talk about this fire that happened in the fall in 2023. It just so happens that just after the long weekend on July 1st, my wife and I were going to go down to Fort Smith to see family and friends and join in the events that were happening in the town of Fort Smith. But prior to driving that way, I was passing Behchoko and as I was passing Behchoko, you could see smoke way in the back. And as I was driving, I told my wife that I don't see no planes there, nobody doing anything about that fire it appears. And you know, in the early days, you know, when I listened to the elders in Fort Resolution in my constituency, they would say that if there's a fire back in the early days, they would have a tower and we have people on that tower. And they see that fire and they will spot it, and they will send a crew out there. The guys who go out there for three days to a week or so and each of the fires is put out. And they'll come back home to their communities and that's how it was.

But when this fire happened, I asked a question why aren't they putting that fire out? And they say well, they have a policy called let it burn policy. Why is that? Why is that policy there to let it burn? And I often thought about it. Well, maybe it's because they don't want to pay overtime or anything like that. So that's what happened. That same fire came close to Behchoko, nearly wiping out the whole community. That same fire also came to Yellowknife nearly wiping out this community.

How did we get to this point? It should never ever come to that. So it is concerning.

You know, a lot of people were afraid. A lot of people were displaced when the GNWT pulled the trigger to evacuate. It was chaos. My colleague Mr. O'Reilly up there, him and I were at Sir John on day one. For 12 hours that day, people were going to get registered to get on the plane to get out of Yellowknife. We had elders, didn't know what was going on. I had to help three elders. I had to go find three wheelchairs. I found it. I'm not going to tell you where I got it from, but I found it. The point is that we had to do what we can at the time to help our people. And when people were waiting in that line-up at Sir John, it was a mile long. There was no water, no seat, no tea, no coffee, no food. It was just the military that were there directing traffic.

After -- for three days that happened and then people were sent south to Edmonton, to Calgary, to Winnipeg. The patients in the hospital here were sent all over the place. Nobody knew where they were. Families didn't know where they were. I had constituent members who were sitting on the streets in Calgary because they were let go from the hotel or didn't even check in. There was nobody there from the Government of the Northwest Territories to help our people down south, but we got 6,600 government employees.

In Fort Resolution, I was there. We had no communication for five days. My wife was here; I was there. There what's no way I could communicate with her to check on her, my siblings, my son, my grandson, my kids. How that happened? Well, we heard that the lines were disrupted and burnt. We had no communication. Thank God we had StarLink in our community. And there were a few people that had it. That was the only way we were able to communicate to our families and friends.

Our food security for YKDFN, Lutselk'e and Fort Resolution, it was a big concern to us. In Fort Resolution, there was a fire south in Fort Smith, fire in Hay River, Enterprise, towards Kakisa. We had no way to get food into our community for about a good week. The GNWT, through some of their staff and the mining industry, stepped up to provide food to help us out in Fort Resolution. When we lost communication, where we had no telephones, we had no debit machines. We had nothing. So they couldn't sell gas. Gas was at a premium. The store was shut down. How did we get in that situation? Where was our backup as a government?

Lutselk'e, we had family and friends were there visiting and when this evacuation happened, there was no airlines. Air Tindi stopped flying to

that community. There was absolutely no transportation to that community. That should never happen. That's why I've been asking for a winter road, extra barging season. Who knows? We may push all-season road. We need that. We need a backup.

While I was in Fort Resolution, we were told to evacuate Fort Resolution. There was a fire in Fort Smith, Hay River. Everybody was already gone. But the leadership in Fort Resolution got together and they said no. Where are we going to put our people? All the hotels are booked. You pretty well have to go maybe far as Winnipeg or BC. So it was really confusing. So the leadership said no, we got an airport here, we've got a lake here. We were better off staying here in Fort Resolution. That was the outcome.

While I was there doing my job as an MLA, I was on the phone for a good ten days dealing with lost constituents kicked out of hotel rooms. They got no money. They don't know where to turn to. Red Cross has been sending them all over the place. Where was the GNWT? There was nobody down there helping our people. But at the same time they had a fire in Alberta a few years earlier - Fort McMurray, Slave Lake, Alberta, BC. What happened in Slave Lake and Fort McMurray is no different than what happened here, but we should have learned something from that, yet we had no plans in place. I was told that this government was totally disorganized. It could have been worse. We could have had a lot of fatalities. Yeah, it's concerning. I'm standing up here today to talk about this motion.

The public is asking for -- to restore public trust in this government. We're not here to blame what happened. We should learn from what happened, so we know what to do next time. But what I heard from my friend on the other side of the House we don't need a public inquiry; It's going to cost millions of dollars; hundreds of thousand people are going to be interviewed; it's going to disrupt the whole government. When I hear that kind of stuff, it's just like you're trying to hide the truth from the people. The truth will set you free they say. Well, this public inquiry will do that.

Our people are hurting. The other day I was in Dettah for my constituency meeting. They made it very clear to me that they're still monies that they paid out of pocket yet to be reimbursed to this day. Why is that happening? Well, the government said no, we're going to cut you off on this day and that's it. There was no communication other than what we heard on the radio. And it happened bang, just like that.

My wife and I were in Hay River eating at The Boardroom when the phone went off. There was accidents, people running to get gas and groceries, and they were driving out of town straight into that fire. Like I said, we could have had a lot of fatalities.

On top of all that, YKDFN, Lutselk'e, Fort Resolution, Fort Resolution Metis Council, paid out a lot of money to the members in the south for food, a little bit of clothing, accommodation. They didn't ask for this. They took the money out of the monies they had from the mining industry, whatever monies they had in their bank account to help their own people. And they want their money back. They didn't ask for this. But I am told that if you want your money back, there's \$45,000 you can get from MACA under this policy.

We should do the honourable thing. If you talk about building relationships and trust with Indigenous governments, you said that in your speeches as a Premier and Ministers; collaboration, I hear that. Restore trust. Even though we pass this motion today, there's no guarantee Cabinet's going to go ahead and do this work. But I want to see that. We're asking you to step up. We need it.

Mr. Speaker, I will be supporting this motion today for the people that want to have their voices heard, and they want to tell their story. I'm only touching on a little bit here. They have a lot to say. So, Mr. Speaker, I will be supporting the motion here today. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Colleagues, I need to reiterate, speak to me. When you say "you" and you're looking over at Cabinet, you're implying Cabinet. I need you to look at me and address me. We do not need to cross this line. This is a very important debate, and I understand that there is going to be feelings in this, and I understand it's emotional, but address it to me as the Speaker of the House. Thank you.

Member from the Deh Cho.

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last summer was a smokey summer.

Mr. Speaker, I second this motion requesting a public inquiry into the wildfire because the people I represent want to know the truth. People in my riding fled from their communities with very little notice. Houses were consumed by fire and many people are still displaced to this day.

An elderly lady that I -- from my community was was medevaced out of the hospital from here, brought to Vancouver, and her escort was sent to Calgary, and the elderly lady passed away in Vancouver by herself without her family

members. There was a young guy from my community also living on the streets here in Yellowknife that went to -- he got medevaced to Calgary, and he died there too without family members. So a lot of people want answers.

The review of the wildfire needs to be independent. It needs to ensure that everyone who was impacted can come forward. The review needs to be done openly and transparently. It needs to provide safe disclosure. And all of this, Mr. Speaker, so we can improve what we do. This motion will affect change that needs to happen so we can respond better to emergencies in the future.

Mr. Speaker, as you look to the future, we may be facing more and more natural disasters and emergencies. Let's take a pause and hear from everyone impacted so we can get this right. This motion clears a path towards good governance. Residents and Indigenous leadership are asking for this and our safety demands this, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Deh Cho. To the motion. Member from Yellowknife North.

**MS. MORGAN:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So what are our options here today? We can decide to continue on with the after-action review where MACA hires an independent contractor, or we demand a full-blown public inquiry with the power to subpoena documents and witnesses to testify before a quasi-judicial panel?

I would argue that there is a third path, which is potentially the best one in terms of balancing the need for a fully independent review with the need to do it relatively quickly and cost effectively, and that is to appoint an independent panel to manage an independent review team similar to what was done in British Columbia in 2017. While Cabinet has not yet agreed to this, I'm hopeful that by passing this motion demanding a public inquiry, by using this tool that we have available to us, it will put enough pressure on Premier and Cabinet to embrace this kind of fully independent review.

I wanted to raise the example of the British Columbia independent review into their wildfire and flooding events of 2017. Basically the BC Premier appointed two, independent, well-respected individuals to lead the independent review team. The leads were Maureen Chapman, BC hereditary chief of the Skawahlook First Nation, and George Abbott, a retired former BC Minister. They conducted public engagement. They completed a relatively speedy review over about five months. It was completed by April of 2018, the year after the disasters, and they came up with

a report that had 108 recommendations which had public buy-in and it prompted the BC government to come up with an action plan to respond to each of them.

I have heard from some in leadership positions that a MACA after-action review is sufficient because sure there were some missed steps, but the evacuations were a success because no one died. At least not before they left the NWT. And sure, there was a little bit of confusion, but we just need to iron out the details and carry on. I think this perspective is profoundly disconnected from how most of us experienced last summer's emergencies. And honestly, this narrative usually slips into the realm of platitudes and excuses like everyone did their best, it was unprecedented, no one could have ever predicted Yellowknife would evacuate, and we couldn't control what Alberta did. And while these may have some truth behind them, this kind of narrative doesn't sound like it's leading us toward a serious reckoning with the oversights and failures and challenges. It's basically telling us not much different could have been done so it tells us not much different will be done in the future.

For me, the main sticking point with the default plan being proposed by the government is the insistence that MACA still be involved in managing certain aspects of the review even if it's conducted by an external contractor. So even if it's just managing the financial aspects of the contract, even if we're assured by the government that MACA staff wouldn't be directing the contractor, they would just be supporting or coordinating, practically speaking Regular Members and members of the public are not going to be in those rooms to be able to monitor to what extent MACA staff are coordinating and not crossing over the fine line towards guiding or directing a contractor. And even if there are ways that an oversight committee could object or complain, you've already compromised the credibility of this review by casting doubt on the independence of the contractor.

So to me, there is a simple solution to this. I believe that MACA should just stay out of the review. GNWT departments should just stay out of it. Except, of course, to provide the requested documents and information and participate the way all the other government departments would be expected to participate so that the independent reviewers can get to the bottom of what went wrong and how things can be fixed.

Now, I want to explain a bit about why so many people do not trust the GNWT to be able to manage a credible review of its own emergency management.

There's always going to be some people that don't trust the government. And in a community like Yellowknife, there are still people with kind of a frontier mentality. You know, just strike out on your own, don't rely on government, fend for yourself. But on the other hand, this mentality is limited by the fact that so very many NWT residents now work for the government themselves. But it's not this kind of everyday low-level distrust of government that is driving this outcry for a public and independent review. During a time of emergency or crisis, I actually think that people's instinct, even the skeptics, is to look to a central authority figure for direction. Last summer, I think people wanted to believe what they were being told by authorities. They wanted to understand what they were supposed to do. They wanted to follow the directions that were given. And that's at the very root of why people feel betrayed, because the people who drove out of Yellowknife right away that very evening the evacuation was called, the people who tried to avoid overburdening the busiest evacuation centres by going to alternative locations, the people who dutifully signed up for the return flights according to the official process, these were often the people who were most disappointed or ended up being under the greatest threat. People felt like they were played for fools by believing the government during a time that they were so incredibly vulnerable.

There was a social contract that was understood, that if you obey the government's order to leave our home the government will ensure you're safe. And many people from many different walks of life felt that that contract was broken, and that is a big deal.

I personally think it was a miracle that nobody died driving out on those highways either from being burnt up in their vehicles or from traffic accidents in the crush of thousands and thousands of vehicles leaving Yellowknife after a late-evening announcement of the evacuation, driving often all night through flames and smoke.

Now many people stepped up. They did heroic acts or everyday acts that protected and comforted evacuees, and those need to be highlighted and built upon too but not taken for granted. The GNWT should not be taking for granted or taking credit for the fact that no one died on that highway, or else we will fail to learn. Fundamentally, the government had to make decisions that had a huge impact on individuals and families' basic sense of security. Decisions about when exactly to allow people to remain at home, when to order them to flee their homes and communities, and when to allow them to return. Those kind of decisions need to be made with a very high understanding and



skillful way of the risks that people face, the risks that they would face if they stayed home, the risks that they would face along the escape route, and the risks that they would face at whatever destination they're sent to. And all of those risks need to be understood within our NWT context. We have so many people already living with the effects of personal and intergenerational trauma, mental health issues, addictions issues, extremely high rates of family violence. And so I'm fearful that without a fully independent review with robust public participation, these risks will not come to light. The risk will not be understood and not be incorporated into future risk management decisions.

Now, we talk a lot about the need to protect and support first responders, and I think about the chaos and confusion around the evacuation of Stanton Hospital. Now patients were flown out, and preparations were made to shut down the entire hospital. Nurses and doctors were ordered to leave town with their families. And then at the 11th hour someone figured out that firefighters actually needed the hospital to stay open. So there was a complete shift, and parts of the ER and the hospital were kept open after all but with inadequate preparations and staffing arrangements. So I can only imagine that it must be a first responder, a health care professional's worst nightmare, to courageously stay behind, to stand on the frontlines, and know that due to poor planning you don't have the proper resources, the proper team, or supports to do your job.

Now many people have shared their heart-wrenching stories with me, and those stories are not mine to tell here today. I hope those people will feel comfortable bringing them forward during an independent review. But I do want to speak a bit about my own experience, and I've spoken about this before in the context of my involvement on the board of Yellowknife Women's Society and our frustration and terror as an organization attempting to work on a different frontline, working to try to find and help the underhoused population scattered in southern cities. So I won't go over all the details, certainly, but over and over again the women's society was assured that the GNWT, the authorities, governments, were taking care of the situation, that plans were being made, processes are underway. But over and over again, there was no follow through. And sometimes we could see obviously government staff were keeping very busy. There was a flurry of meetings and calls. But in very few cases did we see any of this result in actual effective help being provided to the vulnerable people that were ending up on the street. And when we weren't being assured that the GNWT was on

top of everything, we were told the opposite, that the GNWT actually has no jurisdiction to do anything meaningful in Alberta and in any case, we shouldn't expect much because GNWT staff are evacuees too. But then when the Women's Society decided we would try to make things happen ourselves, we were told multiple times to stand down or to start again by going through proper channels, which usually led us to the same place, sending emails into a void with no response. And this kind of chaos may have been sort of understandable if it lasted a few days right at the beginning of the evacuation, or even a week, but after a month the same patterns were happening and we could only conclude that there was something seriously dysfunctional about the emergency management systems within the GNWT.

It was also alarming that it seemed to many that people ending up on the streets of Calgary and Edmonton was simply inevitable, that it was something that maybe we would try to observe or tally, count, but that no clear interventions to prevent this were ever identified as necessary or urgent, as if it was something that just happened but it was no one's responsibility and no one's fault. But I want us to re-enforce that this situation was not and is not inevitable. The fact that our fellow community members ended up on the streets of big cities in Alberta was entirely predictable, entirely preventable, and that if we're going to do this kind of prevention, it will require a major shift in our thinking that I feel is unlikely to occur unless there is an independent review and broad public participation and buy-in. Which brings me to what's the danger? What could be lost if we just went ahead with an after-action review that was led by MACA? What would we miss?

One thing that is top of mind for me is that many government staff, who had various roles in the evacuation or emergency management, would not feel comfortable speaking up or offering their insights at all. They need opportunities to offer their input confidentially if necessary. And if there were MACA officials or government officials present in the room or if they knew that GNWT staff would have access to the documents or testimony that they were putting forward, especially if that could be their bosses, it doesn't matter how much you reassure people that don't worry, you're safe from retaliation, these people will not feel safe in saying what they need to say and what we all need to hear.

These are people who were and hopefully still are working inside the system, and I think they may have some of the most valuable insights to offer into what went wrong and what could be done differently. Many are truly shaken by what they feel were their own departments' failings,

and this has contributed to real damages to morale in the public service. Some have left the public service or will leave unless they see a true reckoning that gets at the root of what happened.

Other dangers is members of the public may not come forward at all. They may not see any point. They may not view this as a credible review, and we will lose all of their valuable insights. I think we should also consider that if there is no review that is seen as independent and credible, that next time there's an emergency people may not trust or follow government's direction at all. People may not agree to leave their homes and evacuate. And that's a real -- very much a real danger that we need to contemplate here. There's also the danger that people's sense of insecurity and their lack of faith in government causes them to move away from the North entirely.

So to summarize and conclude, obviously I feel that we do need a fully independent review without inserting GNWT departments in any of the coordination, management, or oversight. The point of this review is not to find scapegoats to blame but to come up with useful recommendations as expeditiously as possible for systemic change in our emergency management so that our community members can feel confident that we are confronting this changing climate, this terrifying future, that we're confronting it together, prepare to protect our families, our colleagues, and the most vulnerable amongst us. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Yellowknife North. To the motion. Member from Frame Lake.

**MR. MORSE:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, over the past week, there have been a fair bit of discussion about what model would be best. My colleague was just speaking to it also. And, you know, I've really appreciated that discussion. I've appreciated the coverage in the news. I think there's been some excellent coverage helping to inform residents about the decision being made today, what's behind it, and the details.

Mr. Speaker, I'm not 100 percent sure an inquiry under the Inquiries Act is the perfect solution, but I can say that right now it is the best solution which has been brought forward yet.

I appreciate that Cabinet has attempted to work with Regular MLAs. They brought a proposal forward. I would argue that the proposal didn't quite get there. The previous Speaker spoke to that a little bit. Probably what I found the most

difficulty with is that I was allowed to speak to it a little bit, I did engage with my constituents, but the scope of work was not made public. It made it very difficult for me to stand behind that publicly for several reasons. The biggest one being, of course, how am I to engage residents and, you know, take a temperature gauge on public opinion for something that they can't see? How do we expect people to opine on something they haven't read?

And this leads to some general frustrations that I've had, or I guess things I've puzzled over since I started in this role. And one of them has been that much of the work conducted in this Assembly, much of the work conducted by this government, is done with confidentiality written on the documents. Many of the documents I receive are confidential. And I think my key frustration with it is that I can say with almost 100 percent completeness that none of the information that I have received, which has been marked confidential, has been sensitive. Much of it is just day-to-day operations. Much of it is here's the substantiation for the work that we're doing, these are the reasons we're doing it, this is what's going to be done. And so I have been puzzled as to why things are marked confidential in the first place. And I think one of my frustrations with this is I think that the reason behind this is a desire for mitigation of risk but based on what I've seen, there is another risk, and that is the disadvantages associated with people not understanding what their government is doing.

Mr. Speaker, during our orientation process, we've had a lot of briefings with government staff. Or AOC recently had briefings. Our AOC committee had briefings with a number of different departments where departmental staff came in and answered detailed questions about the work they're doing, gave us briefings on particular projects or initiatives the government's working on. And I want to be clear that those briefings gave me a lot of confidence in GNWT staff. It helped me appreciate enormous amounts of work that are being done and the quality of that work. So what we're missing out on by doing much of our work behind closed doors is public confidence in the good work that government is engaged in or the opportunity to have conversations about what's not working and of course correct, as we might have done if a proposal for a fully arm's length review with draft terms of reference was brought forward to the public. So let's turn to the inquiry itself.

First of all, I want to say I'm glad that we took a bit of extra time. This allowed for a healthy public debate and resulted in better informed decision-making and time for engagement with constituents, which I really appreciated having.

I've had many people reach out to me with their thoughts, and I think that that helps us make better decisions when we hear from our constituency, when people who put us in this office reach out to us and tell us what they want.

I will say, Mr. Speaker, that the majority of constituents who have gotten in touch with me are in favour of a public inquiry and have been quite clear with me about that. Some of those voices are coming within the government. Some of those voices are coming from folks who are on the outside. But the message is fairly universal. I want to emphasize that the vast majority of what I've heard is not related to anger; rather, it's an acute interest in getting good recommendations for how to learn from this incident and move forward in a better way. That has been emphasized to me by many residents, and I want to emphasize that in this House too, that that's what people are looking for.

I have also heard from some constituents who are either strongly against or who are expressing reservations about an inquiry. It's important to me that I amplify these voices also and ensure that their concerns are heard. The major concerns I've heard are related to costs. As we know, we're entering a time of fiscal restraint, and residents are quite reasonably raising concerns. There are concerns around what an inquiry might cost, that costs could spin out of control. It's been raised to me that the format of a public inquiry and the formal format that that entails could potentially be a barrier to participation. I think some of the amendments that were brought forward today speak to that and have tried to mitigate that concern. And another concern that's been brought forward to me is the potential for an inquiry to prolong and amplify trauma which has already occurred in the territory.

I want to say that I share some of these concerns, and I have taken the time to investigate them extensively. I've had a significant amount of research done by legislative staff and read through it, how this has been handled in all the other jurisdictions that have been dealt with wildfires, what a public inquiry entails. Our committee had a briefing from an objective lawyer where we asked all the questions about the Inquiries Act, how it works, the parameters that can be put on inquiries, what an inquiry is and isn't. So I feel quite informed coming into this decision today.

So what I will say is that getting the establishment order right is critically important. This is an opportunity to constrain the scope, the cost, and the timeline associated with a public inquiry. And so that is important in

addressing some of the concerns that we've heard.

So I'm going to turn now to talking about things an inquiry needs to be and things it does not. I believe, like many of my colleagues have already emphasized, Mr. Speaker, that it needs to be fully independent from government to instill confidence in the results. Again, I spoke to risk and the risk of people not understanding what's going on. The risk here, of course, is that we do a review, people aren't confident in the results, and the issue continues to burn -- no pun intended here, but the issue continues to smolder in the background. I think if we do this right at the outset, then people will have confidence in the results, and we can move on.

I think it's incredibly important that a review be focused on systemic change, not finding individual fault and blame. I don't think there's a huge amount of value to be found in individual fault. Individuals within a system act in their role, and the role often dictates how action takes place. So if we have an ineffective system and we replace individuals within that system, I strongly believe that individuals would continue to make the same decisions if the system itself does not change. The system dictates action. It is very difficult to escape this phenomenon. An example I would give is the structure of this Assembly and the different sides that you see taken based on which side of the structure you end up on. The system often and the role dictates action.

In particular, Mr. Speaker, I think the most valuable information we need to get a clear picture of and recommendations for, and where I think the most confusion took place, was with interdepartmental, interagency, and intergovernmental coordination. This is where I've heard the most concerns and where I think the focus of a review needs to be. Governance in the GNWT is shifting, Mr. Speaker, where responsibility is being increasingly devolved to Indigenous governments. So we need to ensure recommendations also focus on this unique governance structure in the NWT and its implications for emergency management.

I think it is fair to acknowledge that many aspects of the evacuations and response went well. A huge number of residents evacuated our territory safely. As my colleague eloquently noted, it is not clear the level to which this was due to coordination or luck. This, again, emphasizes the need for an objective review which can come in and help us get at these questions. And, again, as was so eloquently emphasized by my colleague from Yellowknife North, we need to focus on where people fell through the cracks; how we can prevent that

from happening again. That's where I feel we need to be focusing a review.

I want to speak a little bit to lessons I've learned from this process that we've gone through and the process that we continue to go through as we're voting on this motion. I believe very strongly, and this was emphasized to me most strongly during your priority setting process last week, that this group is at its strongest when we come together as 19 individual MLAs. The lesson that I take from this is that I think we need to use Caucus more effectively. I've conveyed these thoughts to the Premier and colleagues. I want to emphasize that relationships and collaboration are incredibly important to me, and I want us to continue to work together and change the way we work as need be to better facilitate consensus-based decision-making.

I want to speak a little bit to, you know, something that is a bit of a passion of mine, conflict theory, and the differences between healthy and destructive conflict. There have been times in this Assembly where destructive conflict has created a lot of division, and that is something that I heard from residents when I was going door to door in this election, that they want to see professionalism and they want to see the MLAs focused on doing good work. One thing that I have not seen during this debate is destructive interpersonal dynamics. Rather, what has taken place is a respectful and substantial public debate on an important decision regarding how review of government takes place. This, Mr. Speaker, is exactly the kind of conversation we should be having in this House. It's a healthy discussion. It's an important discussion. This is how representative democracy works, and I think it's working well in this case. And I thank my colleagues for the respectful level of discourse that I've seen in this House from the day we got elected. I think we're doing a great job in that respect, and I really appreciate it.

I want to speak a little bit to the events themselves. Facing the circumstances that we did, I think it would be unfair to expect that everything would have gone perfectly. I want to refer back to the briefing I spoke to with staff. We had staff come in and explain to us how the event went down, and you know, what it was like being first responders. And what really struck me is the level to which this was a much bigger and more challenging fire season than anything we've experienced before is really humbling and scary when you step back and look at it. The word "unprecedented" was used so much last summer that it became a trope, but there is no other word to describe what happened. The NWT has never faced anything like what happened last summer. During that

briefing, I reflected on this summer and the fact that until that moment I don't think that I had realized I hadn't taken the time to consider how much the events had affected me, what it felt like to fear for the safety of my family. And I was very lucky that that fear was short lived and much less consequential than others. I can't begin to imagine, Mr. Speaker, what it felt like to lose a home, to evacuate and later receive news that your community had burned.

Mr. Speaker, I can't imagine what it would have been like to be on the ground as frontline staff and firefighters and have the weight of responding to this event, of protecting communities on your shoulders, and how it might feel to have to make the call to pull back from the fire to protect human life and know this would result in lost homes. A lot of frontline staff came away traumatized, demoralized, and it's really important that they not be forgotten here. And it's important for me to emphasize that we and the public deeply appreciate the difficult and dangerous work our frontline staff engage in to keep us safe. So, again, Mr. Speaker, I want to reemphasize that systemic failures are what need to be the focus here, not individual fault, and that is what I really hope comes from this review. I hope that the parameters that are put on the review ensure that this happens. Again, I would speak to the establishment order in ensuring that the parameters in that order are gotten right, and I think that the way that this motion has been constructed is to ensure that there's collaboration on that establishment order and that there's contribution and public discussion about it to ensure that the parameters are just right, that we get this thing right, that we're not focused on the wrong things.

So to conclude, Mr. Speaker, I am voting in favour of this motion because we need a fully independent review of the incidents, most importantly to learn from them and to ensure we are prepared when we face challenges like this in the future. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Frame Lake. To the motion. Member from Sahtu.

**MR. McNEELY:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the motion, I can only -- not being from a community that was directly impacted, I could only imagine, and I can't say any more than what was already said by my colleagues. When I look around this room, the majority of the leaders here represent communities that seen flames. And from the Sahtu, looking at the outside looking in, the pictures that I've seen on social media throughout the summer and into the fall is so harsh or so dramatic or so devastating to put it into words, and when I hear

stories of a vehicle stopping at the flames and the ladies putting their head down and crying in fear of going further, it just goes to show the trauma that is still experienced and the nightmares of what was seen months ago.

In the spirit of what my colleagues are saying here, we're not to point fingers or put blame but learn from it; learn from decisions that were being made. This is learning by examples on developing your experienced skills so in the future you can make proper decisions from the experience you had. Now, having an independent third party with a different set of lens will share the views of a thorough third party investigation, if you want to use that word. But I'm sympathetic -- not sympathetic, I'm in total support of this motion for those reasons. We don't want to put blame. We want to learn from it and want to move on. And this Assembly, I think, is seeded with reputable leaders to do just that. Now there's other incidental costs that might come in effect, but that's part of the job we're here to do.

So in saying that, Mr. Speaker, mahsi, I will be supporting this motion to simply restore trust and show the people that we are here, we heard them, we fully understand. And I just wish to say God bless them, and I hope that they don't have traumatized nightmares moving forward. Mahsi.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from the Sahtu. To the motion. Member from Mackenzie Delta.

**MR. NERYSOO:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too will be supporting this motion. Although the communities of the Mackenzie Delta haven't been directly impacted, watching these scenes on the television is pretty dramatic, seeing that long line of people waiting in the hot sun. Because when I say some of these weren't directly impacted, there was an elderly couple that came to Yellowknife during that evacuation process and when they were in Yellowknife for medical, they got medevaced and being medevaced, the family members from Aklavik could not find them. They had no idea where they were. They were searching, trying to phone, and in the meantime they were in Calgary. A few days later they were reported found in Calgary. So the elderly ladies themselves did not know where they were. So it's this kind of stories that you hear, and the region was completely shut down because the government was shut down. They had people that were supposed to go on medical travel, people that were supposed to go on other appointments, but due to the government being shut down these individuals were not able to keep their appointments. So although the region of Mackenzie Delta was not directly

impacted, we felt the heartbreak of the people that were directly in this position, not placed in this position, but we felt how dramatic it was for them and we hope that, you know, it never happened to the people of the Northwest Territories again. And so for that reason, I will be supporting this motion. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you. Thank you, Member from Mackenzie Delta. To the motion. Member from Thebacha.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the idea of a public review of the events from the 2023 wildfire season has been top of mind for me from early days from when I started the end of my work with environment and climate change in the fire program into my campaign for MLA as I was elected to this House and as I became Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

One of the things that I want to emphasize today is I want to stand here and thank all of the people and the personnel and the firefighters and the GNWT staff who gave up so much through this event. They gave up time with their families. They spent days on the road, sleeping in tents in some instances, in the smoke, day after day. Mr. Speaker, this level of commitment was outstanding. There were single moms that left their small children at home in order to fulfill these roles. We had many elders that were long retired from the fire program that came out to support this event, that put their boots on and went back to work for weeks and weeks at a time. Our children and our grandchildren were on the fire line protecting our communities and ensuring that we had homes to go back to and that we were safe. These things are so critical to building trust in the Northwest Territories.

I want to relay and build on that a little bit, and I just want to talk a little bit about a couple of personal stories that I have from the summer of 2023 and my involvement in the frontlines of the fire program and in ensuring that, you know, all of the communities were protected. And I want to tell a story about a young man from Ontario who was in Fort Smith -- or in Hay River on deployment. And one day on the fire line, he was struck by a falling tree which split his helmet, his protective helmet, in half. That young man was sent out in a medevac. He went down to Edmonton. He got an MRI. He got checked out by a doctor. Three days later, he was told that he was good, he was okay, and he was fine to come back to work. On the fourth day, he was standing in front of me asking for a new helmet. That level of dedication is unprecedented in how people want to protect these communities and the level of dedication that they have to these programs.

I want to also say that sitting in a role in the wildfire management program, especially in a senior role where you're expected to make decisions day after day, instance after instance, you know, in those scenarios the people that take those roles have to make a decision. They're sitting in a seat that requires them to provide guidance to the rest of the staff and to the rest of the personnel. And all you can do when you're sitting in that chair -- and I can speak from experience -- is make the best decision that you can based on the information you have at the time. You can look back and say oh, I should have done this or I should have done that, and hindsight is 20/20 all the time, but when you're sitting there making that decision you're doing the best for the community or the person or the territory based on the information you have. And I think that really provides context for how we move forward and how we look at a public review of the processes and what we can put in place to ensure that those processes are improved.

Mr. Speaker, I've spoken about this numerous times since my election to MLA and prior to that in my role with environment and climate change and also in my role as deputy mayor of the town of Fort Smith. I was part of the community leadership. I sat as the acting mayor for a while, while I was also working with ECC. I was involved in some of the decision-making in that process. And part of that process, I recognized the level of trauma that many of the residents of the Northwest Territories faced and still face to this day. It was a traumatizing experience for a lot of people. But keep in mind that it was also a traumatizing experience for a lot of staff. You know, these folks faced this day in day out. They were there weeks at a time working through these, making the best decisions they could based on the information they had at the time.

You know, the wildland firefighting community in Canada is a very small one. In 2023, we lost seven firefighters, and one of our own here in the Northwest Territories. Adam Yeadon was killed by a falling tree while protecting his community in Fort Liard. And this is not something that I speak of lightly because it is something that is very personal to me and it hits close to my heart, Mr. Speaker.

Over the last summer, in 2023, the conditions were unprecedented. The indices were off the chart. The drought code was off the chart. We were having weather events like we'd never experienced before. Wind, high temperatures. It was a whole another climate than what we've been used to in the past. These were experienced all across Canada, Mr. Speaker. Four provinces in Canada had unprecedented events. Nova Scotia lost 200 homes and had

thousands of people evacuated. British Columbia had 80 times their normal burn -- amount of forest burn in a year. Alberta had ten times their normal forest burns and they lost multiple homes, and they evacuated 38,000 people. None of these incidents in other parts of Canada resulted in a public inquiry. What they've resulted in is after-action reviews and expanded processes that look at what we're doing in the fire and emergency preparedness system and how those processes can be improved to make things better as we move forward.

We experienced some of the worst possible conditions in 2023, and this was the first time, the first time, that a home in a community was ever lost to wildfire in the Northwest Territories. There have been cabins, there have been things on the landscape that have burnt previously, but this is the first time a home was ever lost. That in itself, Mr. Speaker, has an impact on the staff at environment and climate change, on the first responders that attempt to protect these communities and protect these homes.

Mr. Speaker, I'd like to speak a little bit about the difference between an inquiry and an after-action review. An inquiry, when I hear the word "inquiry", right away my mind goes to punitive and that an inquiry is about, you know, ensuring that we have someone to point a finger at the end of the day whereas I look at an after-action review as a process of looking at the past to ensure that we can use it to inform the future, to make sure that, you know, that we're growing as a community, as an organization, overall to ensure that we provide the best service to the residents of the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Speaker, I've discussed this with many constituents, some of which were directly impacted by this event and are still struggling with the inability to be able to tell their story, to be part of a public process. You know, in these conversations I've also spoken with some Indigenous leaders that their communities were directly impacted. And in these conversations, they've said -- I've explained the difference between a public inquiry, and I've explained the potential possible ways we can move forward with a public after-action third-party review that's separate from government. And I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, the response I got reflected the fact that at the end of the day, these people want to be heard, they want their story to be told, they want it to be done in a public way, they want to ensure that the past informs the future and that those things that come out of a public review are used to ensure that as we move forward we have better systems, we have better communications, we have better processes in

place. It's not about saying that it was this person's fault or that person's fault. It's about ensuring that as we moved forward as a territory, we create a much better environment for everyone.

Mr. Speaker, we've heard the word "trust" many times in this Assembly over the last number of days and weeks. And, Mr. Speaker, the residents of the Northwest Territories put trust in 19 Members of this Assembly to become the government and to run this operation going forward. The 19 Members of this Assembly put trust in the Premier and Cabinet to do the same thing, Mr. Speaker. So as we move forward and we consider this motion, I suggest that we put trust in the process and that we allow the public to participate in third party after-action reviews, and after those are complete we look at the results of those, and if at that point we're still not satisfied that we've met the needs of the people, that we've answered the questions that have been asked, then let's have a conversation about a public inquiry. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Thebacha. To the motion. Member from Yellowknife Centre.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, there's so much to talk about and we're given less than 20 minutes to talk about it. And part of this is about the conversation. I mean, the morose public continues to go through this process, and they want their chance. They're pining to be heard, Mr. Speaker. They want to be involved. They need to be involved. And for that I want to thank the public. The public interest has been on this since day one. There's been no shortage of interest and certainly input from the public, Mr. Speaker. And, you know, we can attempt to name some. We'd like to highlight who have done their parts, and we mention those folks who have offered insight and guidance. We inevitably miss a few people, but I would like to note two before I continue.

I would like to thank publicly Shawn Dean for writing -- sending out this message, writing in the paper, speaking to CBC, about the structure and the process. His insight is invaluable to how things go. At the same time, I'd also like to thank former Member Mr. O'Reilly from Frame Lake. His information, thoughtful advice, details. It was very important to the work we do here and I think in my ways we wouldn't be half as strong without his insight so thank you, sir, for that. And in many ways, you know, I think the public in its own way is still owed a bit of an apology of what they lived through. Sometimes it's not about individual wrongs but it's about collectiveness about supporting them. They

lived through a traumatic event. I mean, we've heard it so many times. Two-thirds of the territorial population was evacuated. They were told to leave; it wasn't a suggestion. It wasn't like hey, if you're not doing anything this weekend, leave. No, it was like fire and brimstone; you have to go. And we have to take that into account.

And, Mr. Speaker, I think what doesn't get underscored through this whole process is something critically important, fundamentally important, that the 19th Assembly didn't do everything wrong. I mean that. Yes, I can be tough on government, and I plan to continue to. But that said, in all fairness they didn't do everything wrong. As a matter of fact they did wonderful things meeting the expectations of the public. They tried their best. They did their best in many things. It's not about finding someone to account as an individual. This is a process. I mean, I'm not hearing one person on this side of the House driving anyone to perdition. We're hearing about talking about the gaps, not finger pointing. How do we do more, not shaming. This motion is bigger than that. This motion's about doing more and better, finding those things, helping the public. The motion is driven by the public, not just by us. We're just the vehicles of those voices.

So when we talk about this, we're talking for the public, I believe; strongly I do. We're talking about wanting to help the public through their stress, through their trauma, through their impacts, and help restore the trust. The trust in the system.

Now from what I've heard, and I continue to hear, is that the government has this perception it has a monopoly in trust and, frankly, I think they're in a deficit. So back to when you force two-thirds of the population out, the public does feel like they want a public style of answers. And to achieve that goal, I think rightly done, singularly done, might be better done through an inquiry. And yet I find there is no path clearer. There's no journey that will fulfill that need.

This is not a repugnant process, Mr. Speaker, with respect to the government doing their work. It isn't just because they could do it better. It's about doing it right and allowing that to do that. So like the old adage, if the people lead maybe the government will follow and hence they're leading and they're giving me the direction.

Since I've become an MLA, and even prior to that, I've only heard people want a chance to participate and they're supportive of public process. So if the government wants to do its little reviews and this and that and whatever

they want to do, I'm not here to stop them. But I'm saying if we want to do a full review, if we want to ask ourselves the important things, we seek it through independence. So the government-run review, we have to look at it in the context of this: Those who pay for it, those who structure it, those who control it, will get the outcome they've paid for.

So if we frame this inquiry up in a manner of openness, we structure it and budget around cost, we draw out our critical direction through the scope, and we bring on a Commissioner with a credibility, we can find out what happened. We can talk about these things in a matter of how people -- their impacts and discuss them. We are a narrative territory all throughout us. I hear people tell stories throughout everything we do. It's part of the journey of who we are. This is about what can be done better.

We will ask the inquiry the right questions by allowing them to say hey, what are the questions? Through those questions, it'll drive answers and new questions. A government contractor's hands will be tied. There's no way they will have the flexibility and ability to chase down those strings, to pull those threads, and understand those journey lines that need to be tested and questioned. Again, this is not about shame. This is about how do we restructure and rebuild.

So time is of the essence, Mr. Speaker. We hear the government just let us do our thing. Again, I'm not standing in that way. As a matter of fact, I don't think I've heard any Member in this House say don't do that, shame on that idea, that's the worst -- I've never heard that at all, and I cannot be more clear. We just say we believe in a different process not driven strictly by us but supported and inspired by the public's needs. We have to allow an inquiry to be organic, to look at what's relevant, and to do that we must inspire them and give them that ability.

An independent inquiry has been said many times, but I just want to say it's been a -- it is a useful process. It will drive answers that sometimes we can say we know the unknowns and we don't know about them, but we have to plan for the unknowns we don't know about. And that's the exciting part about an inquiry, which is it can find questions that maybe we haven't even thought of yet, Mr. Speaker. But we have to give it and frame it around that opportunity to help placate that anger that's sitting in the public. I mean, we've heard the phrase zombie fires. Well, I can certainly attest, trauma is zombie anger as it simmers slowly within people, their experience, their trauma.

Regular citizens that I speak to day to day, whether I'm at the Co-Op, whether I'm at the downtown grocery store, whether I'm getting gas, whether I'm just anywhere buying coffee, even at Javaroma, I have yet to hear a person say no, no. And, you know, the more we frame around the cost, you know, the public confidence, trust, and working through the process has value. So regardless of what the government may keep saying, you know, often you hear the phrase fear mongering. And I don't want people to say whatever number they say on the table's going to be; it's going to cost millions and millions and millions of dollars. That just isn't true.

Now, we have a different perspective, and I recognize that. But that goes back to how we launch this inquiry and frame it with a budget and inspire it with the right questions. I believe we can find the right person to lead an inquiry. We have incredible Northerners who could do this, whether it's a former judge or a current judge, or someone of that merit or quality; we have so many wonderful people. This is a simple but yet complex issue. It's a simple question by saying tell me about your story. It's complex, yes, by staying focused. Those journeys will be challenging. But creating and fostering that right question around an environment that draws out the important issues will be a challenge but an important challenge that we must rise to. And I support that. An inquiry will set the tone, Mr. Speaker, a welcoming tone, even when we have unwelcoming news that should be there. This needs to find its own maturity as it -- sorry, as it reaches out to the simmering public that is craving to tell it. This process may feel unyielding, but it's critical. Underlying the truth -- sorry, the truth is underlying this narrative that we've all been sharing for several months, and we must dig it up and hear it.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, an inquiry brings a transparency like no other. We've heard about the talents, the abilities, the tools, the skills of what it does. But it also speaks beyond the truth. It speaks to the gaps and confidence of the public.

This government is in a deficit, whether it's the 20th Assembly, whether it's the 19th, it goes on. Government is often in the deficit of public confidence. It must work doubly hard constantly to ensure that it's working for the people on the right issues, inspiring them. So even if it says don't worry, we got it, that's probably one of the more scary experiences you'll ever hear on the street from people. Like oh my goodness, the government's got it. I don't know if that sells anymore, Mr. Speaker. That may have sold at a time when people looked to their process of governments when they said don't worry, we'll



take care of everything, we'll make it all go away. Well I'll tell you, this is a different world, even when I was an MLA eight years ago and beyond. Things have changed. The public demands an accountability like no other, and I think that they're right. They demand a process to be fully involved. They demand to strip away their pain through telling their stories. And I can tell you, again as I said earlier, we are a narrative community. We're a narrative town. We're a narrative territory, Mr. Speaker. People want to do it. So as this government continues to rope through this process, they must break away from the shackles of government in saying we do business our government way. No, Mr. Speaker. This is our chance to do business the people way.

I'll finish by saying this, that public trust means more now than it ever has. And this is our critical opportunity when we reflect back and say, did we do the right thing? Did we rise to the expectations or challenges or dreams of the public to satisfy their needs? I hope those who reflect back years later from this opportunity to say we did everything we could to make sure we continue and move forward and do it right. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Yellowknife Centre. Members, before we go, a revised version of Motion 9-20(1), Establishing a Public Inquiry into the 2023 Wildfires as amended, is now being distributed to you.

To the motion. Member from Hay River South.

**HON. VINCE MCKAY:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate all the words and comments that have been shared today so far by all Members of the House, and I respect personal opinions and views to what's transpired over the last little while. I didn't come here with a big formal speech and I felt, you know, we had some time to write one but I still didn't do one. And the reason why I didn't do one is because of my experiences and my involvement in last year's wildfires, both of them, the previous flood we had in Hay River, in the community I represent, the annual emergency events we continually have in Hay River, and I just wanted to share those as a resident and as a Member who campaigned on holding this government accountable to the events that we had.

Now, I think the biggest issue comes down to the inquiry and a third-party independent review. And immediately as I became a Minister, I started questioning about the difference and also what we can do and go ahead to start investigating. And that's basically where I started off with, is going in that direction.

Most people know I have some experience and background in emergency services, 30 years of emergency services. And, yes, I hate the word "unprecedented". Last year was that. But it was also something that I never want to go through ever again, and I hope nobody ever has to go through that ever again. And what I went through last year, it started off in May, and May was done. K'atlodeeche First Nation, my neighbour to Hay River, lost their band office, lost their Judith Fabian Centre, the elder centre, and some homes, and there was no call for a public inquiry. Now there is one. Why? Because of the unprecedented fires that we've had, the amount of people evacuated, the amount of people that had to leave their homes.

Most of those people went back to their homes. I'm still in a riding where there are people that are not in their homes. So I'm standing here as a Member of Hay River and the Hay River region and the Hay River riding, not only as an individual who's been involved and has been there and seen what happened, and has questions myself, but as somebody who's going to continually fight to try to get these homes rebuilt. And I just came back from Ottawa doing the same thing. And I know one thing, and we've had that time to educate ourselves, which has been really good, and we know the price of an inquiry can be really high.

The most recent one, one individual, one area of Yellowknife, cost almost a million dollars. I can't imagine an inquiry bringing in all the people that they have to bring in, costing tens of millions of dollars, when we could use that for housing. And that's just my personal view on that.

You know, in the events that happened August 13th, I still remember a phone call that I got from a mother who was frantically screaming on the phone of her son who said that he was going to die in this fire, and she asked me to send crews to go save her son. And that will never leave my mind. Do I want questions answered? Yes, I do. And that's why I've asked for the third-party independent review, and I've continually asked for it to be independent and open transparent and public -- you know, public input and everything, right. And I guess that's been the biggest thing is, people don't understand the difference between an inquiry and the third-party independent review. And initially, I probably wanted an inquiry not knowing really the full difference and the scale of it.

Am I comfortable with a third-party independent review coming out with probably the same recommendations and same views as an inquiry? Yes, I am. And I'm quite confident that the people that elected me had the trust in me

and the confidence in me to continually fight for that. And the people that I've talked to, the Aboriginal groups that I've talked to in my riding, have said Vince, we got you, I hear what you said. And even the people that I've spoken to just in general, like you know, explaining what I thought was best and they agree. So I think the problem is not so much, you know, the independence or whatever. It's education for everybody to understand what the third-party independent review or the inquiry is.

One of the big things that I have concerns about with an inquiry, and the first thing that came to my mind when we started talking about it, is it immediately goes to lawyers, for lack of better terms, and away they go. Personally, in my years of experience in emergency services, I would rather see somebody who is qualified and knowledgeable in the emergency to start asking these questions independently - the same type of process that was done for Fort McMurray, same process that was done for Slave Lake. And I think those are things that would benefit the questions we have and the answers that we could get.

I'm also concerned about timelines. Like, I think we've all had the experience to educate ourselves in inquiry and reviews. I'm concerned about timelines. We want to know now. We want to know sooner rather than later, and we don't want to be held captive by an inquiry. We want to get things done. We want to get questions answered.

A lot of people suffered from this. There is a lot of loss. There's a lot of suffering. There's a lot of trauma. I've been through -- that was my -- in one year, that was my second evacuation. And I'm only going to speak of Hay River here for the moment because, yes, the other communities all suffered being evacuated. Fortunately, they went home. But we're still trying to rebuild Hay River and that area. We're still trying to put homes back in those communities. We lost a lot of people who I hope will come back, and if we can get homes rebuilt in the Deh Cho riding and the Tlicho riding, you know, I'm hoping these people would come back. And this is a goal. If we spend \$10 million on an inquiry that could be better used on homes, I'd like to see that.

You know, most recently there's been a lot of talk on CBC. There's been a lot of discussion on what an inquiry is. And you're right, an inquiry is totally independent. And there's lots of pros and cons behind it. And listening to the CBC Radio of a gentleman from Toronto who's done a lot of inquiries, and he even said it himself, he said there is a lot of pros and cons behind inquiries, and some of the issues that they have with them is they can get away and

they can get very costly. And one of the quotes that he said that just sticks with me to this day, and it was kind of almost used by one of the Members there, and I liked it because it is a good saying, and, you know, an inquiry is like a ship that you set to sail. It all depends on the captain you have on that ship. If you don't have -- if that captain wants to do whatever they want and they go out and cruise around and do -- you know, cruise the ocean, good luck railing him back in. And that's the same thing that's potential in an inquiry. And I don't want to see that. I want answers. I want things to happen. And the residents want answers. This isn't about money for me. This isn't about it's costing too much. It's about how and where we spend the money that will benefit the residents of this community, the residents of this territory, the residents of my riding. And that's what's most important to me.

I'd like to make sure that the residents have a home to go to, and I'd like to make sure that people are happy to live in the Northwest Territories and trust the government. And I do respect all the words that have been said here today, and I appreciate everything that's been said; however, again, we all have our own opinions. We all have our own views on how things should transpire. At the end of the day, we're all doing what we think is best for the communities and the Northwest Territories. And I appreciate the work that's been done on this motion. For me personally having been involved, having been ground level, I can still hear those residents wanting answers. And for me, the outcome of an inquiry, the outcome of an independent third-party review, will have those answers. It's how we get there and quickest and the most economical for the residents. With that, Mr. Speaker, thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Hay River South. To the motion. Member from Hay River North.

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the public inquiry is being sold as the only way for the public's voices to be heard and as the only morally upright option that we have. But neither of those are accurate. I caution Members from making this an issue of good versus evil. I think the Member from Hay River South spoke pretty eloquently about his connection to the evacuations and the wildfire season. I have a similar one. It's been two years now where it's been constant disasters, constant evacuations. And when I went door to door, this is the one thing, this was on the top of everyone's list to talk about. It was on the top of my list. It was my number one priority when I came to this Assembly, was to ensure that what we saw happened last year doesn't happen again, that we are better prepared.

There's been a lot of talk about what a public inquiry is and what it isn't. A public inquiry is something established under our Public Inquiries Act. Every piece of legislation, every Public Inquiries Act across the country is different. Ours is decades and decades old. It's, I think, 12 clauses. It's very short. It doesn't have a lot of guidance. There's not a lot of options in there. There's not a lot of room to create what, I think, a lot of the Members think can be created.

We can create an establishment order that will define what the inquiry will look like. Based on this motion, that establishment order includes the Commissioner ensuring that perspectives of all Northwest Territories' residents are adequately captured in the public inquiry undertaken by the board in relation to the 2023 wildfires. That's a pretty big scope. That's 45,000 people who are now eligible to participate in this public inquiry. We have no ability to cap how many people want to participate or how long they testify for.

Through the establishment order, we can do certain things. We can set up certain parameters. We can define the number of board members. We can define the remuneration for board members, so how much they're going to get paid, the remuneration and travel expenses for witnesses, a deadline for the final report. And just so everyone knows, I think the number of final reports that have been on time with public inquiries is probably a small minority. These are processes that always -- almost always cost more and take longer than anyone expects.

We can define the board's ability to engage legal services. And there will be legal services. There will be many lawyers. Yes, with the public inquiry I expect a number of lawyers to be buying second and third homes.

We can define the board's ability to engage with experts, accountants, engineers, court reporters, people to help them set up the venues, people to arrange travel, to broadcast the proceedings, all of those types of things.

So what we can't do, like I said, is limit the number of witnesses, limit the time each witness has to provide evidence, provide a process for the board to follow. And that's one of the strengths of a public inquiry where they're not being controlled, they can control their own process.

Another thing we can't do under our legislation is set a budget. So I'm not sure what legislation other Members are looking at or where they're finding this ability for us to set a budget, but I don't see it in our legislation, especially when

other pieces of public inquiries legislation have explicit language talking about setting a budget.

Regulations can be made with respect to any matter that the Commissioner considers necessary for carrying out the purposes and provisions of the act. And so that allows some discretion in terms of the regulations you can make but those regulations have to tie to one of those 12 clauses, and there is nothing in there that I can see that would allow us to actually set the budget. And even if we do set a budget, even if there was that ability, Mr. Speaker, everything costs more than we expect it to cost. I don't think I've seen anything estimated that has come in on budget. And so what happens when the public inquiry runs out of money and they haven't made their way out of Yellowknife yet to look at Behchoko or the South Slave? Do we just say well, that's it? No, we keep pumping that money into it.

People want to be heard. That's what we heard a lot of today: People want to be heard. And I know people want to be heard. I want to be heard. I'm lucky I'm in this position; I get to be heard about this because I get to speak about this. It's therapeutic. People want to heal. They need to be able to speak to heal. A public inquiry is not a place to heal. It's like a courtroom. You're a witness. There's a potential that you'll be cross-examined or examined and then cross-examined.

There's not -- there's a very, very limited option for anonymity. You know, we hear a lot about government employees, they won't want to participate in an independent third-party review because they're concerned. They're not going to want to get up on the stand and be on TV making their comments. I don't know how that is any more accessible for people. You know, there's businesses who do lots of work with the government. I've heard some of them want to make comments anonymously. You can't do that in a public inquiry either. There's a limited set of circumstances where information or your identity can be kept confidential, but if we're talking about many people who want this because they're afraid their boss will get mad at them or they think that in the future they may not get a contract, at some point that's no longer a public inquiry if everyone is anonymous for the reasons like that. So I don't expect that that will be the case. I don't think that this idea that this is a way for people to have their voices heard anonymously is accurate. Nothing's admissible in a public inquiry that's not admissible in court. So hearsay, anonymous unsigned submissions, those things don't fly in a public inquiry. I don't think the public wants to be put on the stand like they're in a courtroom and testify. I don't think that's what healing is.

And as a Member of this last Assembly, I've seen a public inquiry. It was -- there was no healing involved in that. I don't know one person who felt like that went well, who felt like that was a good idea. I'm talking about the inquiry into a Member's actions. It was referenced earlier. One person, one location over a short period of time. That inquiry cost \$800,000. Members of the Assembly were pretty shocked when that happened because we all realized that we put this into motion, and it became its own thing. We lost all control, all ability to control those costs. So what did we do? We actually changed the legislation to be able to avoid a public inquiry. I think that speaks volumes to our Public Inquiries Act here in the territory.

So what's the alternative, Mr. Speaker? Well, we propose an alternative. This is what I've envisioned back when I was on the campaign trail. An independent third-party review done by a contractor, whose reputation is on the line, who is going to hand us a report with their logo on it, and they're not going to want anything in there that's whitewashed. You know, there was comments that their work will not be transparent. There's ways to make it transparent, Mr. Speaker. I've offered to the Members to set up an independent commission. We could appoint a member. The Members could appoint a member. The Council of Leaders could appoint a member. And that would be a buffer between the contractor and the GNWT. They would have access to all of the draft reports of the contractor, all the material that the contractor has access to. If the contractor requests something and they don't get that, the board would know and there's legal remedies in the contract to address those. It's essentially the same as compelling information through a public inquiry.

And there was comments that they might not know what questions to ask. Well, that's why we want to start with extensive public engagement. Extensive, Mr. Speaker. There's the opportunity for people to write, write in, and have that information brought into the review. We're having in-person meetings, public meetings, Mr. Speaker. And those don't have, you know, departmental staff. I've been to those before in Hay River a couple years ago. We had one of those about the flood. And so I know what those operate like. And there's the option to provide input anonymously. We can put provisions in the contract that say information the contractor receives from individuals, GNWT employees, or who indicate they want to be anonymous, we can require that they do not share that information with the government. So here are options that are based in fact, based in reality,

and not, you know, based in other pieces of legislation from other jurisdictions.

Our review will have an extensive engagement, like I said, with the public as well as with community governments, with Indigenous governments, the local, regional, and territorial EMOs, the emergency management organizations, with NGOs, with businesses, with chambers of commerce. The reports produced by the City of Yellowknife, let's say, or Avens or any of these other organizations or communities, those will be analyzed. We're going to look at the preparedness level of the NGOs, of the public, of the government. We're going to examine roles and responsibilities, the communications that went out to the public. From all of this, we're going to produce a comprehensive report. It's going to include a timeline of the wildfire season so we can see when things happened, when this fire started; why we were driving out of Hay River moments before, for many people while the fire was crossing that highway.

Mr. Speaker, I watched the video that we took the other night -- or the other night I watched a video I took on the way out of Hay River, and I'm looking at it and I thought why was I even driving that direction? It was sunny when I left. Halfway to Enterprise, the sky turned black and there was just red and yellow in front of me. So I'm well aware that there's issues that need to be addressed. That should not have happened. I want to make sure that doesn't happen again. That's one of the main reasons that I'm here.

We're going to look at the strengths of the response and what we could build on, and we're going to look at the weaknesses and the gaps. And out of this is going to come evidence-based recommendations, not just for the government but for everyone, because everyone has a role in this. We want to -- this is going to assist the NGOs. It's going to assist the public. It's going to assist everyone. And that's on top of what is already happening. I don't want people to think that this is something far in the future. There is a lot of work that has already happened. There's additional training that's going on. There's updated plans within departments. We're bringing firefighters on earlier. So there's a lot of work that is happening, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we need to answer the big questions. There's no two ways about it. We need to answer the big questions. People need assurances that what went wrong is going to be fixed. People need to feel heard and people need to heal. And that's the goal with this review. That's what we want to achieve. So after these reviews, after they are made public -- probably the biggest reviews the

Government of the Northwest Territories has ever undertaken. So after all of this information is out there, after everyone's had a chance to speak up, have their voices heard and see how we are making changes based on their voices, if after all of that people want a public inquiry, then we can look at that. That will give us time to amend the legislation so that we're not stuck with this archaic legislation that is not going to do what people imagine it's going to do.

So, Mr. Speaker, for those reasons, and because we don't know how long this inquiry's going to take, how much it's going to cost, and one thing I do know it's going to be a distraction. It's not going to be pleasant. We've experienced a public inquiry before; we know it's not pleasant. It's not an experience anyone wants to be involved with. We have an alternative. I'd be happy if the Members will participate in that alternative. I would love to have the Regular Members appoint someone to be on that oversight committee, to oversee that contract, to ensure that I'm not, as was alluded to earlier, covering anything up.

So, Mr. Speaker, if anything good has come of this it is that there has actually been debate in the public about the wildfires, about legislation, about politics, and civic engagement. So this is a moment when we can come together. This doesn't have to be divisive. It's an opportunity for the territory to come together, work on fixing what went wrong and moving forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Hay River North. To the motion.

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Question.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Question has been called. Question being called, the Member from Range Lake has the opportunity to conclude.

**MR. TESTART:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, over the course of today, we've had a public debate on the nature of the emergency that brings this motion before the House today, the nature of what that motion is calling for, and we've also made that motion more collaborative, more inclusive of treaty partners, more mindful of costs, and to ensure the protection and anonymity of those participating. And all of this, this motion, all the research we've done that my honourable friends have spoken about over the last week and before that, I want to reassure my friends opposite that we do, in fact, work in reality on this side of the House. We do get sound legal advice from our experts, and the resources afforded to us in the execution of our duties as Members of this institution are second to none. We are very well equipped to look at legislation

as lawmakers, to get independent advice that's not coloured by anything other than the advice, and we've done that. So I feel very confident that we -- when we say this legislation can do what we say it is not a flight of fancy. It is not an imaginary concept that we dreamed of one night. It is, in fact, based on the law. And the federal law that -- I think, more Canadians are familiar with, more Northerners, that has produced national inquiries is very similar to ours. We've heard experts. One of the -- the expert by the Honourable Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs spoke -- literally wrote the book on public inquiries law, and he mentioned in that interview that he had looked at our legislation, and it was not nearly as problematic as perhaps the GNWT's position was on -- or the concerns that have been raised. And we've been trying earnestly to express that we've done our homework. You know, and it is frustrating at times that it's like speaking into our own echo chamber because folks aren't listening, and that's frustrating, right. We keep saying we've done our homework. We keep saying we're gonna compromise. You're concerned about costs? Okay, let's put -- let's compromise on costs. You're concerned about timing? Let's make sure there's timelines. We have worked to compromise and to address the concerns from our government partners -- or our colleagues opposite every time we've engaged them on this issue, and we have not seen -- well, we've not seen the same compromises on their end.

And the reason, again, this is important is we're all affected. All of us. Every single one of us. You know, I had to put my wife and children on the highway out of the territory and stay behind. And, you know, I was in emergency operations. I wasn't a frontline fighter or anything like that. So, you know, my contribution was in other ways. But we all have a story. And whether we stayed, or we left, or we were in a community that was unaffected, we are all affected, you know, not directly affected. So when we say this is not a witch hunt, we mean it because we're not looking to cast blame. We're not looking to cast blame because we all know what this was like. It was hard. It's probably the hardest thing we've had to -- this -- the GNWT has ever had to deal with. And that's what this is about. It's about getting the right answers so things like this doesn't happen again. And it is about healing. And the suggestion that an inquiry can't lead to healing, I think is fairly difficult to take when you consider we've had a national inquiry into a very sensitive subject. You know, and I'm not going to delve into that here, Mr. Speaker, but a very sensitive and personal subject for Northerners, and I think that did lead to a lot of healing. So I reject the suggestion that an inquiry will be divisive and find fault and split

people. I think it can heal, and I think it's necessary to give that level of independence so we know that what is coming out of an inquiry is the right information.

And you know why inquiries go over budget, Mr. Speaker? Because they find out new questions they need to ask. They listen to the people who are coming before them. They listen to witness testimonies. And that's how things are going. But we've said if we get -- let the government do its report, get the after-action reports done, get the recommendations in place to fight the coming fires so we don't have to be evacuated again, if nature cooperates. Give those reports to the inquiry. Let them review it. Let them see what the government has done and that will necessarily scope this exercise. Again, we have brought this forward and it's fallen on deaf ears, Mr. Speaker.

And I agree with those who have said, you know, people in these roles made the best decision for the time based on the information they had. I agree 100 percent. We all -- you know, we all know that that's the reality here. It's not about saying, you know, attacking first responders, attacking firefighters, attacking emergency service workers. And the suggestion of that is not what we are about. These are our friends. These are our neighbours. These are people who saved our communities, and we respect them for the heroes that they are.

And the events that happened at this Assembly last into the personal conduct of a Member that led to exorbitant costs, that was not a public inquiry under the Public Inquiries Act. The Commissioner had -- the process that was used is through the Conflict Commissioner, and the code -- the Integrity Commissioner process we have here, it has its own rules. It has similar powers; in fact identical powers to how an inquiry works but it is not the same thing as this. And its budget was handled by the esoteric bodies that exist within this Assembly. And it didn't have to go there I don't think, but I'm not going to litigate that either. But we can keep being scared about costs and timelines and things like that, but what we haven't heard is what is the budget for this process? How -- what is the right amount of money to spend on this? Is it \$20,000? \$40,000? \$100,000? \$10 million? \$5 million? Two? We haven't been told. No one's been told. Despite us asking well, what is reasonable, then? What is reasonable for this government to carry in its fiscal -- given the fiscal circumstances we have. We haven't gotten an answer. So what is the cost? Because of what we're proposing on this side of the House is going to be too expensive for this government to bear, but they can do it for a reasonable cost that's going to get the same

level of results, I just don't see how that works out. It's not just lawyers. It's the engagement sessions. It's the ability to bring people forward.

So I think we've -- I'm not going to belabour this anymore, Mr. Speaker. It's just concerning to me as well that when -- again, when we have done our homework, when we have tried to work collaboratively and hear the concerns and then be reasonable. And no, we are not -- this is a nonbinding motion, Mr. Speaker. We are aware of that. An inquiry doesn't happen just because this passes. But this sends a clear message of what the expectations are. And that's why collaboration's so important here. And, again, we have tried. The second and myself have tried to make this a process that we can all get behind because healing is what we need to do at the end of the day.

It was unfortunate that some of the debate has been characterized by stubbornness or a desire to point fingers or find fault or certainly to divide communities, because that's not what we're trying to do here. We're trying to bring communities back together. We're trying to bring this government closer to the people and restore the trust that has been broken through a very traumatic event. And I think this is the right tool to do so, and I'm pleased to have brought it forward and to be supported. And at the appropriate time, I will request a recorded vote. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you. Thank you, Member from Range Lake. To the question.

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Question.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Question has been called. Member from Range Lake has asked for a recorded vote. All those in favour, please stand.

#### RECORDED VOTE

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** The Member for Range Lake. The Member for Monfwi. The Member for Frame Lake. The Member for Great Slave. The Member for Mackenzie Delta. The Member for Yellowknife North. The Member for Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh. The Member for Deh Cho. The Member for Sahtu. The Member for Yellowknife Centre.

**MR. SPEAKER:** All those opposed, please stand.

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** The Member for Thebacha. The Member for Kam Lake. The Member for Hay River North. The Member from Hay River South. The Member for Inuvik Twin Lakes. The Member for Nunakput.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Those all abstaining, please stand. Members, the results are 10 in favour, 6 opposed, zero abstentions. Motion 9-20(1) as amended has been carried.

---Carried

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, I will ask to have a brief break. We've been in these chambers for over two and a half hours. We need to give our interpreters a break as well, so I'd like to thank them very much for us as we went through this debate in this motion. Thank you.

---SHORT RECESS

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, colleagues. Motions. Member from Yellowknife North.

MOTION 16-20(1):  
APPOINTMENT OF DEPUTY  
CHAIRPERSONS OF COMMITTEE OF THE  
WHOLE,  
CARRIED

**MS. MORGAN:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Whereas -- so this is Motion 16-20(1), Appointment of Deputy Chairpersons of the Committee of the Whole.

WHEREAS Section 47(1) of the Legislative Assembly and Executive Council Act requires that there shall be two elected deputy chairpersons of the Committee of the Whole;

NOW THEREFORE I MOVE, seconded by the honourable Member for Hay River North, that the Member for Deh Cho, Sheryl Yakeleya; and, the Member for Sahtu, Daniel McNeely, are hereby chosen to be the deputy chairpersons of the Committee of the Whole.

**MR. SPEAKER:** To the motion.

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Question.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Question has been called. All those in favour? Opposed? Abstentions?

---Carried

Motions. Member from the Deh Cho.

MOTION 17-20(1):  
GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST  
TERRITORIES RESPONSE TO Tabled  
DOCUMENT 27-20(1),  
CARRIED

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

WHEREAS Tabled Document 27-20(1) is a petition signed by 1,077 people, including 396 residents of the Northwest Territories;

AND WHEREAS Tabled Document 27-20(1) does not strictly conform with our rules to be submitted as a petition; and

THEREFORE I MOVE, second by the Member for Yellowknife North, that the Government of the Northwest Territories provide a response to Tabled Document 27-20(1) and table it in this House within 120 days.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from the Deh Cho. To the motion.

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Recorded vote, please.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Mr. Premier.

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So just for the public's awareness and the new Members, when these motions come forward and they ask for a response under 120 days, the government generally abstains so we will be abstaining. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** The Member has requested a recorded vote. All those in favour?

RECORDED VOTE

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** The Member from Sahtu. The Member for Yellowknife Centre. The Member for Range Lake. The Member for Monfwi. The Member for Frame Lake. The Member for Great Slave. The Member for Mackenzie Delta. The Member for Yellowknife North. The Member for Tu Nedhe-Willideh.

**MR. SPEAKER:** All those opposed? Those abstaining?

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** The Member for Thebacha. The Member for Kam Lake. The Member for Hay River North. The Member for Hay River South. The Member for Inuvik Twin Lakes. The Member for Nunakput.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you. 10 in favour -- just hold on one second. 10 in favour. Zero opposed. 6 abstentions. The motion is carried.

---Carried

Motions. Member from Yellowknife Centre.

MOTION 18-20(1):  
APPOINTMENT OF MEMBERS TO THE  
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES HONOURS  
ADVISORY COUNCIL

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

WHEREAS the Order of the Northwest Territories was established in 2013 by the Territorial Emblems and Honours Act to recognize individuals who have served with the greatest distinction and excelled in any endeavour benefiting the people of the Northwest Territories or elsewhere;

AND WHEREAS Section 21(1) of the Territorial Emblems and Honours Act provides for the creation of a Northwest Territories Honours Advisory Council to review nominations and recommend appointments to the Order of the Northwest Territories;

AND WHEREAS Section 21(2)(b) of the Territorial Emblems and Honours Act provides that the Council be composed of not more than five members of the public appointed by the Legislative Assembly on the recommendation of the Board of Management;

AND WHEREAS Section 22(2) of the Territorial Emblems and Honours Act provides that the Members of the panel hold office at pleasure for the term not exceeding three years;

AND WHEREAS the Board of Management has considered a number of qualified individuals for appointment as Honours Advisory Council Members;

AND WHEREAS the Board of Management is tasked with recommending individuals to the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Assembly is prepared to make a recommendation to the Commissioner;

NOW THEREFORE I MOVE, seconded by the Member for Kam Lake, that the following persons be recommended to the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories for appointment to the Northwest Territories Honours Advisory Council, effective immediately for a term of three years: Their names are as follows:

- Ms. Jane Arychuk of Yellowknife; and
- Ms. Denise McDonald of Inuvik.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Yellowknife Centre. To the motion.

**SOME HON. MEMBERS:** Question.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Question has been called. All those in favour? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion carried.

---Carried

Motions. Yellowknife Centre.

MOTION 19-20(1):  
APPOINTMENT OF EQUAL PAY  
COMMISSIONER

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

WHEREAS section 40.2(1) of the Public Service Act provides that the Commissioner, on the recommendation of the Legislative Assembly, shall appoint an Equal Pay Commissioner to exercise the powers and perform the duties set out in this Act;

AND WHEREAS the position of Equal Pay Commissioner became vacant in June of 2023;

AND WHEREAS the Board of Management was tasked with recruiting an Equal Pay Commissioner and has recommended an individual to the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Assembly is prepared to make a recommendation;

NOW THEREFORE I MOVE, seconded by the honourable Member for Kam Lake, that Ms. Renee Caron be appointed as the Equal Pay Commissioner in accordance with the Public Service Act by the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories as recommended by the Legislative Assembly;

AND FURTHER, that the Speaker be authorized to communicate the effective date of the appointment to the Commissioner.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Yellowknife Centre. To the motion. Question has been called. All those in favour? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion carried.

---Carried

Motions. Members' statements. Member from Great Slave.

### Members' Statements

MEMBER'S STATEMENT 87-20(1):  
SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

**MS. REID:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Northwest Territories is a wonderfully diverse place to live. My riding has many newcomer residents that have joined us from numerous countries of origin, and I am proud to represent them in this House. The territories' struggles include those of our neighbours in all their diversity. When matters on the international stage cause my neighbours to lose sleep with worry over their loved ones, I am humbled to speak to these matters and be their voice in this Chamber.



As Northerners, we stand with the citizens of Ukraine, those who trace their roots to Ukraine, and those who have joined us here in the territory since their country was invaded two years ago as of this Sunday -- or sorry, Saturday. Pardon me, Mr. Speaker.

Ukraine's struggle for sovereignty and freedom reminds us that democratic values need to be protected. The recent death of Alexei Navalny, a courageous voice against authoritarianism in Russia, serves as a stark reminder of the dangers posed to those who dare to speak truth to power. Navalny's death underscores the urgent need for global condemnation of such atrocities and a resolute stance and support of democracy and human rights. In Ukraine, where the struggle for democracy has been ongoing amidst external aggression, the Ukrainian people continue to demonstrate unwavering resilience and determination. Here in Canada, we must continue to show our support for Ukraine and condemn any actions that undermine its sovereignty and democratic aspirations. I am thankful that the Canadian government is resolute and steadfast in their support. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Great Slave. Members' statements. Member from the Sahtu.

MEMBER'S STATEMENT 88-20(1):  
18TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GREAT BEAR  
RIVER BRIDGE APPLICATION

**MR. McNEELY:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, today marks the 18th year anniversary for the Bear River Bridge application from the Department of Transportation to the Sahtu Land and Water Board dated February the 22nd, 2006. It is a historic annual on the Sahtu determination. The milestones continue in collaboration between the Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated and the Government of the Northwest Territories on the \$140 million infrastructure funding announcement dated June 2018.

Mr. Speaker, this determination continued by witnessing the April 2019 signing of the memorandum of understanding for both parties to champion the Mackenzie Valley Highway regulatory process.

In achieving this, Mr. Speaker, Sahtu determination seen the submission of the DAR, or Developers Assessment Report, October 12th, 2023. This submission starts the Mackenzie Valley Highway project environmental assessment. Mr. Speaker, the Sahtu determination continues with enthusiasm to complete and resubmit the Great Bear River Bridge permit application.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, critical to project's fruition is permitting and funding. In recognition, this project has a pre-equity position. Projects are essential to public transit while creating a disposable economy. Mr. Speaker, in tribute, the Cece McCauley legacy continues. Mahsi cho.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from the Sahtu. Members' statements. Member for the Monfwi.

MEMBER'S STATEMENT 89-20(1):  
IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS  
GOVERNMENTS

**MRS. WEYALLON ARMSTRONG:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, today I'm going to talk about the vital role of Indigenous governments. Mr. Speaker, in November when Members delivered round table speeches, the Premier said something. He said that we need to recognize in 50 years the territory will look much different than it does today. He also said that since Indigenous governments are taking on more responsibilities, there is a greater need to work closely with them to ensure that any new legislation, programs, policies are developed in a manner that is comfortable for Indigenous governments so they can at some point take on those additional responsibilities to administer themselves.

Mr. Speaker, that vision by the Premier is something that all Dene, Inuit, and Metis people have been envisioning for themselves for the last 50 years, or going back as further as 150 years since Europeans colonized this country.

Mr. Speaker, as an Indigenous person and people, deciding our own destiny and being self-sufficient and economically self-reliant on our own lands are all things that Indigenous people have strived to achieve for generations. Dating back to 1969 when the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT was formed, it was always the intention of Indigenous people across the NWT to take on governance responsibilities for ourselves. That includes developing legislation, programs, and policies to administer ourselves on areas of settled land claims, settlement agreements, and treaty lands.

Mr. Speaker, that vision outlines new -- from that vision, numerous documents were presented were published. For example, by Dene Nation, over the last 50 years -- or 50 years ago they publish a book, a Public Government for the People of the North with a discussion paper. That was for -- that document in 1981 was not only --

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Monfwi, your time is up.

---Unanimous consent granted

**MRS. WEYALLON ARMSTRONG:** (audio) still. Okay, much of what was written in that document was later used as the basis for self-government and other land claims negotiations.

Mr. Speaker, the days of Indigenous government being controlled by settlers or newcomers or non-Indigenous politicians in Yellowknife or Ottawa are over. My way or the MacKenzie Highway or no deal has to stop. What we need is a collaborations to work with Indigenous people to move forward. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Members' statements. Member for Deh Cho.

MEMBER'S STATEMENT 90-20(1):  
IMPACTS OF 2023 WILDFIRES ON DEHCHO  
COMMUNITIES

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, as you know all the communities in my riding were hardest hit from the wildfires last summer. Deh Cho region residents, like other South Slave communities, fled on a moment's notice as the fires burned out of control towards our communities. Mr. Speaker, K'atlodeeche First Nations was evacuated twice during the summer of 2023 for a total of 61 days. That community lost 18 homes, their band office, and Dene Cultural Institute was burned. Enterprise was completely devastated losing roughly 90 percent of their entire community with only about eight houses left standing. Overall, Enterprise was evacuated for 41 days, and Kakisa was evacuated for 24 days.

Mr. Speaker, on August 13th, Enterprise was hosting a community event. It all seemed well that day. Everything was going good. People were enjoying themselves. And then the wildfire smoke began getting closer. Little did residents know that a vastly expanding fire was barreling towards them fueled by wind speeds that reached upwards 80 kilometres an hour. That is an extremely fast moving fire that left very little time for people to pack up and evacuate. In fact, by all accounts the evacuation of Enterprise was chaotic and caught everyone, including the mayor, completely off guard.

Mr. Speaker, this is where my constituents feel forgotten because nobody from the GNWT contacted Enterprise residents or leadership to warn of a wildfire heading their way fast. It was only thanks to the chief, April Martel, of K'atlodeeche First Nation, who informed the

mayor of Enterprise in an emergency management organization meeting taking place that day. Then to make matters worse, later that night the wildfire took down telecommunication services, taking out internet, cell and land line phone services in several South Slave and Deh Cho communities for days. That left Enterprise, Fort Providence, Kakisa, and Hay River almost completely in the dark in terms of communication for five straight days during a territorial state of emergency.

Mr. Speaker, my constituents are understandably --

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from the Deh Cho, your time is up. Thank you.

---Unanimous consent granted

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And thank you to my colleagues. Mr. Speaker, my constituents are understandably feeling angry, hurt, and abandoned by our government as a result of the wildfires and its after math. I will have questions for the Minister of ECC later today. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from the Deh Cho. Members' statements. Member from the Mackenzie Delta.

MEMBER'S STATEMENT 91-20(1):  
ACCESS TO DENTAL SERVICES

**MR. NERYSOO:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is evident that the NWT health department is having trouble recruiting dental services for the residents of the Northwest Territories. In the year 2023, there was a total of 242 patients from the Mackenzie Delta region alone who were referred to Yellowknife to see the dentist. Another 33 were referred to Edmonton.

Mr. Speaker, the cost of these patients to travel from Inuvik to Yellowknife back to Inuvik is a modest \$387,200. I say modest because cost factor does not include travel from their respective communities and for accommodations while in Yellowknife.

Mr. Speaker, I think it would be reasonable if the department looked at contracting dental teams to travel to Inuvik for one or two weeks every three months or so. This may cut the expense on the department down to a reasonable number. The residents of the Beaufort Delta region would definitely take advantage of this opportunity with patients not having to travel to Yellowknife and not having to take time off work from their jobs and/or be away from their families for an extended period of time. The Beaufort Delta region requires the services of dentists like the rest of the residents of the Northwest Territories. If not a permanent

dental team, then I hope the department can provide an interim solution. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Mackenzie Delta. Members' statements. Return to oral questions.

Member from Yellowknife Centre. We'll go back to Members' statements.

MEMBER'S STATEMENT 92-20(2):  
COST OF RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS  
SERVICES

**MR. HAWKINS:** That's very gracious of you, Mr. Speaker. Your kindness knows no bounds. See, that's how you do it. Work with the Speaker. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, cuts here and cuts there, Mr. Speaker. We're hearing from the Finance Minister how they're unilaterally picked this number of \$150 million; that's 50 a year, 50 a year, and a 50 a year before we end this government, Mr. Speaker. \$50 million without having a general, good, thorough discussion with Members' perspectives on this side of the House. No, they do public -- they do policy by public release, Mr. Speaker.

So knowing that, this government should be thinking about its cuts in a way of, well, let's reverse the attitude and say how do we get more money into the government or how do we do business better? And that's what brings me to my point, Mr. Speaker. Sometimes the low hanging fruit is the obvious.

Mr. Speaker, there are over 300 people who leave Yellowknife airport, okay. It doesn't mean they're from Yellowknife. At the Yellowknife airport, they travel to Edmonton to get rheumatoid arthritis support. Now when you add that up, close to \$2,000 a plane ticket and return, and that's not just the full cost but the point is that 2,000 -- we're talking over \$600,000 spent on that service alone in the Northwest Territories just based on plane tickets. No different than the point made by my good colleague from Mackenzie Delta. If we want to start doing business better, we have to start thinking it through quite simply. Why are we flying people and driving people and sending them all these places when we can send a dentist to Inuvik? We'd be saving thousands of dollars. Why are we flying people to Yellowknife -- from Yellowknife to Edmonton for rheumatoid support when we could bring someone to the Northwest Territories at a fraction of the cost.

Mr. Speaker, I looked up online the average cost to pay a full-time person, who's a doctor,

and a specialist in rheumatoid arthritis is in the range of \$270,000 a year. That's a pittance compared to what it costs just to buy plane tickets.

Mr. Speaker, if the Simpson government was really serious about looking at the bottom line, they look at how we could save money, not butcher it away at the budget. So I encourage them to use a scalpel, not a butcher approach, Mr. Speaker. And I will have questions maybe today, maybe tomorrow, we'll see who's the lucky Minister this afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Members' statements. Returns to oral questions. Recognition of visitors in the gallery. Acknowledgements. Oral questions. Member from the Deh Cho.

### Oral Questions

QUESTION 75-20(1):  
2023 ENTERPRISE WILDFIRE  
MANAGEMENT

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Mr. Speaker, can the Minister of Environment and Climate Change explain why the GNWT failed to contact the community of Enterprise on August 13th to inform them of an impending wildfire that was being pushed towards them very quickly due to high winds? Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I can assure this House that the wildfire that went on to impact the community of Enterprise was initially attacked on the first day it was detected on August 2nd and was actioned consistently prior to the tragic event of August 13th. The fire crews actioned -- the fire was actioned by crews and aircraft that were allowed but the extreme fire conditions and extreme fire behaviour made fighting the fire very challenging.

The incident commander had daily contact with the regional emergency management organization. On August 13th, ECC officials contacted MACA twice, first about preparing for the evacuation alert, then about upgrading the evacuation alert to an evacuation order of Hay River and Enterprise, and a virtual meeting was held. At this time, the fire was approximately 30 kilometres away from the community, and there was a participant from the hamlet of Enterprise on the call. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, and thank you to the Member for that -- the Minister. Mr. Speaker, I understand that this ECC Minister was not Minister on August 13th last year, but can the Minister explain if the department was aware of the level of risk that Enterprise was in that day when they were forced to evacuate the community? Thank you.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, ECC was aware that the communities in the area were at risk, and that is why the evacuation notice and then upgraded to the evacuation alert before finally being put on full evacuation. ECC and MACA have a wildfire event notification protocol advertising on what level of risk a wildfire may pose to a community. The protocol determines when and how ECC will advise MACA of the threat level to a community and when evacuation is recommended. The fire was between 25 and 30 kilometres to the north and west of the community at noon on August 13th, and the fire activity on the east side of the fire had been quiet. Control efforts on the east and north flanks, the closest to Enterprise, had held for the days leading up to August 13th. Weather and fire behaviour modeling predicted that the fire would spread northeast towards Great Slave Lake and possibly Hay River. However, late in the day, the wind switched direction spreading the fire directly toward Enterprise. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Minister. Mr. Speaker, can the Minister explain if ECC has in place any sort of early warning detection system for natural disasters to help protect communities in an answer safety to disasters? Thank you.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, ECC has a series of tools that are used to detect and monitor wildfires, including lightening detection, weather stations, fire detection towers, satellite-based remote sensing, and aircraft smoke patrols. In the event of a wildfire, additional monitoring is put in place depending on the location and nature of the fire. ECC's value-at-risk system automatically notifies managers of values that may be potentially at risk. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Final supplementary. Deh Cho.

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I know that fire lookout towers were widely used tool to combat wildfires in the past. Can the Minister tell us if fire lookout towers are still being used by ECC across the

NWT, and are they still considered an effective tool to use against wildfires? Thank you.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, fire towers have been used as one of the series of tools used by ECC to detect wildfires, including smoke patrols, lightening detection, networks, weather stations, satellite base and public reporting. The industry standard for fire towers is moving away from having people work in isolation for safety reasons. However, fire towers are being used to house communications, equipment, and detection cameras. ECC is investing in remote camera networking to provide 360-degree coverage and operate 24 hours a day providing a proven and effective way to monitor new and ongoing fires. The camera detection network will be greatly expanded into the area of NWT where wildfires can be detected. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Oral questions. Member from Range Lake.

QUESTION 76-20(1):  
2024 WILDFIRE SEASON PREPARATIONS  
AND RESOURCING

**MR. TESTART:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the province of Alberta has recently declared an early start to their fire season this February, which is a real evidence that climate change is a historic reality for Canada. Now our concern here is, of course, more wildfires, more evacuations, more issues that are going to relate to our four seasons. So I'd like to ask the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, are we moving -- are we in a position to move up our wildfire season as well? Are we looking at that to ensure we're prepared for what's sure to be coming down the pike. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Range Lake. Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And thank you to the Member for the question. Yes, plans are already underway to start our fire crews and aviation contracts earlier in the season. This will allow training to happen sooner, especially on the resources that are in the South with the potential for additional early season fires. So we should have everything up and running in early May. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. TESTART:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And thank you to the Minister. That's good news. Is the department going to -- as private sector contractors are important in our firefighting efforts, will those contracts be moved up as well

to give our aviation companies, in particular, time to prepare and bid on those so they're not conflicted with other contracts they've committed to? Thank you.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Yes, the plan is to start our aviation contracts earlier in the year. Most of the contracts that we have for fixed wing aviation are long-term, multi-year contracts. And there's a provision within the contract through notification from the department to allow those contracts to start sooner. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. TESTART:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the Minister. Does the Minister feel that the department has adequate resources to begin this work at this time? Thank you.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we have increased our resources. From last year's allocation, we brought on some extra rotary wing as well as by identifying the need and potential for holdover fires to have early activity in the spring of 2024. We are ensuring that our resources are brought on sooner and that the preparation work, which much of which started in the fall of 2023, is completed and prepared for a potential early start. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Final supplementary. Member from Range Lake.

**MR. TESTART:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Minister. For clarification, does the department have enough financial resources in its current budget to accommodate the early start to the fire season? Thank you.

**HON. JAY MacDONALD:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the budget for the fire suppression program is a predetermined budget that is very much based on our contractual obligations. So typically, it is the practice of the department when we start our season earlier that there's a potential that we may have -- we may end the season earlier, but that is all really dependent on the level of activity and the amount of fires and resources that are required. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Oral questions. Member from Yellowknife Centre.

QUESTION 77-20(1):  
RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS SERVICES

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'm going to pick up where my statement left off and focus my questions on rheumatoid arthritis, Mr. Speaker. Is the

Minister -- so I'll qualify my first question on this. Is the Minister aware of -- as to what program that supports rheumatoid arthritis exists in the Northwest Territories? Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Yellowknife Centre. Minister of Health and Social Services.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, what I am aware of that the program that used to support the program in the Northwest Territories right now they -- everybody is having to travel to Alberta for that. There are discussions. I actually have a meeting in regards to this. It is ongoing work. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I am aware of over 300 people annually have to travel to Edmonton for those types of support services. Can the Minister either clarify or confirm that type of number in the context of volume and cost? Thank you.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I can't confirm those numbers at this time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the Minister -- is the Minister aware of how long the Northwest Territories has been absent of support services for rheumatoid arthritis given the fact that she had sat on the social development committee last term and is a nurse so she should be familiar with the concept of the program? Thank you.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I did sit on the social development, and I am a past nurse, but that doesn't mean that I am aware of the operations when I was a Regular Member. As the Minister, I know that there are ongoing discussions on how to, you know, work with all of our specialty areas and trying to obtain specialists to come to the Northwest Territories. So this will mitigate having patients having to travel, and this work is ongoing. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my understanding is it's been well over four or five years, which would have predated the Minister being elected to this House, but that said the important factor here is that regardless whether it's one year or four years is what initiative is the department of health doing to reestablish the services in the Northwest Territories. Given the fact that we're aware that the government plans to cut \$150 million from the bottom line of programs and potential services, we need to know what they're doing. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, there are vacancies in a

lot of our specialty areas, and there's work ongoing. There is many ways that the department is reaching out, working with southern practitioners to be able to come to the Northwest Territories. There are a lot of challenges, like we said, all over Canada and, you know, when we think of all of the different areas where we are not having specialists come here, the bottom line is that part is -- you know, even though we know that it is hard for the patients to have to travel, you know, and -- you know, but if the service is -- if we can't get the service here then we're not -- we're not preventing them from accessing those services. But the work is ongoing, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

QUESTION 78-20(1):  
ACCESS TO FAMILY DOCTORS

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate it very much. Mr. Speaker, yesterday I talked about the transparency, or I should say lack thereof, of the waiting lists for people trying to get a doctor, and it's from the department's information they provided that there's close to 2,000 people on that list. So my question specifically to the Minister of Health and Social Services is so she's aware of the number, what is she doing about the number to make it transparent for the public? Thank you.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the idea of a family doctor is something that happens in the territory only in Yellowknife. And of my 47 years living in the Northwest Territories, I've never had a family doctor. I've had a chart, and I've gone to a hospital where my medical records are, you know, and right now the way that the landscape is in health care is, you know, the idea of seeing the right person for the -- what the patient -- or the person needs is not necessarily always a doctor. And right now we are working on primary health care reform within the health and social services so that patients, anybody that can see a -- you know, if it's a nurse practitioner or a doctor or a wellness person, you know, that they're seeing the right person for their needs. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I have to tell you I was offended and anybody else probably reading -- who reads transcripts, the tone of the Minister saying it's only a problem in Yellowknife, Mr. Speaker, maybe we should just double check before I proceed on questions -- to the next set of questions, is the Minister also a Minister for health in Yellowknife? Thank you.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I am the Minister for all of the Northwest Territories. That is why, Mr.

Speaker, you know, when we have people bringing up the issues that, you know, that -- that's what I'm speaking to. People in the communities don't have a doctor. People in the regional centres don't have a family doctor. We have doctors that travel into the communities. They're not their family doctor. The care that they're getting, you know, everybody what we're doing is we're trying to ensure that the Northwest Territories has access to the right service that they need, whether they're in Yellowknife, whether they're in a regional centre, and whether they're in the small communities. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess I'll first agree that it shouldn't be -- I wish it wasn't a problem in the communities as well. But is it -- is the fact that this is a major issue in Yellowknife, it's not a problem for the Minister? That's the question.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Mr. Speaker, there is a health care crisis throughout the territory, throughout Canada. You know, I think the -- what I'm trying to say here is every community in this territory, we are struggling with shortages. Whether it's Yellowknife, the regional centres, and it's not just doctors, it's nurses, it's -- you know, it's all of our specialists. This is across Canada. So I don't have the answer that the Member is looking for at this time, and what I'm just saying is that there is an issue and, you know, the department is working hard to recruit doctors, nurses, specialists. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Minister of Health and Social Services. Final supplementary. Yellowknife Centre.

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, it sort of sounded like she was a territorial Minister on the last piece, which I'll accept. That said, I was worried where she was going with that.

Mr. Speaker, to my original question, what is the Minister doing to bring transparency to the waiting list to get a doctor? Thank you.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll have to get back to the Member on that.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Minister of Health and Social Services. Oral questions. Member for Mackenzie Delta.

QUESTION 79-20(1):  
ACCESS TO DENTAL SERVICES IN THE  
BEAUFORT-DELTA REGION

**MR. NERYSOO:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's related to my Member's statement on dentists

within the Mackenzie Delta region. The high volume of patients from the Beaufort Delta region having to travel to Yellowknife to see the dentist in one or two days. Will the Minister or is the Minister looking at contracting a dental team to visit the Beaufort Delta region periodically until a permanent solution can be found? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Mackenzie Delta. Minister of Health and Social Services.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the RFP for dental services to the communities was put out. There was no submissions. And so we are continuing to work with the facility out of Inuvik as we can, and I can be -- I can let the Member know that on March 12th -- or 13th to March 19th, Fort McPherson will be getting the dental for his community. Unfortunately, Aklavik and Tsiigehtchic, there are pending equipment repairs. So those communities are still pending for dentists' visits.

**MR. NERYSOO:** Okay, I'd like to thank the Minister for that response. I think I should have clarified my question a little further.

In terms of trying to get all the patients or the referrals seen by the dentist, you know, having a team go travel to Inuvik where the surrounding communities around the Beaufort Delta can go into the communities, that's what I was referring to if the Minister has any indication to get somebody to Inuvik? Thank you.

**HON. LESA SEMMLER:** Mr. Speaker, if I just -- if I may, dental treatment services are not insured services provided by health and social services. This is not something that we receive federal transfers on. What we do is we are funded through non-insured health benefits to provide the travel to private dental clinics which the clinic in Inuvik is a private dental clinic. Unfortunately, nobody has bid on any of those RFPs to travel. There are many reasons, and we are working with Indigenous Service Canada to rectify a lot of those reasons. You know, we've had discussions with Indigenous governments on all of the issues. Dental services in the Northwest Territories, the core, or the skeleton as I might put it, is NIHB. Like, that is who funds all of that travel for private clinics who are -- that's who provides services, dental services, throughout Canada. This is not just in the Northwest Territories. So I just want to make sure that the public and the Members know that, you know, we are working. My staff, you know, we're currently working on a contract on a new renewed contract for NIHB with ISC, Indigenous Service Canada, and that there's

ongoing discussions especially related to dental. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Minister of Health and Social Services. Oral questions. Member from Yellowknife Centre.

QUESTION 80-20(1):  
SUPPORTS FOR ELECTRIC VEHICLES

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on a different vein, I'd like to ask questions to the Minister in charge of the PUB.

A constituent of mine drew a very important issue recently, and he talked about the fact that he had bought an electric vehicle but the infrastructure costs by Northland Utilities is being dumped on him if he wishes the proper upgrades so he could plug in his electric truck. Mr. Speaker, this is a territorial issue. If we want people to move to electric vehicles, why are we dumping tens of thousands of dollars on that individual?

My question specifically to the Minister responsible for the PUB is what is he prepared to do for policy direction to the PUB to ensure that that individual -- tens of thousands of dollars cost doesn't fall on people that could be throughout the Northwest Territories? Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Yellowknife Centre. Minister of Public Utility Board.

**HON. VINCE McKAY:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am aware the problem however I am not aware of the concerns about the policy changes. So I'll have to get back to the Member's question. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you. Oral questions. Written questions. Returns to written questions. Replies to the Commissioner's address. Petitions. Reports of committees on the review of bills. Reports on standing and special committees. Tabling of documents. Premier.

### Tabling of Documents

TABLED DOCUMENT 33-20(1):  
FOLLOW-UP LETTER FOR ORAL  
QUESTION 3-20(1): IMPLEMENTATION OF  
THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF  
STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR NON-  
PROFIT SECTOR

**HON. R.J. SIMPSON:** Mr. Speaker, I wish to table the following document: Follow-up letter for Oral Question 3-20(1), Implementation of the Recommendations of Strengthening

Supports for Non-Profit Sector. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Mr. Premier. Tabling of documents. Member from Monfwi.

TABLED DOCUMENT 34-20(1):  
PUBLIC GOVERNMENT FOR THE PEOPLE  
OF THE NORTH

TABLED DOCUMENT 35-20(1):  
WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE – THE  
SIGNIFICANCE OF DENE KNOWLEDGE

**MRS. WEYALLON ARMSTRONG:** I would like to table the following two documents entitled Public Government for the People of the North; and, We Have Always Been Here - The Significance of Dene Knowledge. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Monfwi. Tabling of documents. Member from Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh.

TABLED DOCUMENT 36-20(1):  
CORRESPONDENCE FROM GERALD  
ANTOINE, DENE NATIONAL CHIEF, TO  
COMMISSIONER MARGARET THOM  
DATED FEBRUARY 13, 2024

**MR. EDJERICON:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table the following documents: Correspondence from Gerald Antoine, Dene National Chief, to Commissioner Margaret Thom dated February 13th, 2024. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Member from Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh. Tabling of documents. Notices of motion. Motions. Notices of motion for the first reading of bills. First reading of bills. Member from Yellowknife Centre.

### First Reading of Bills

BILL 1:  
AN ACT TO AMEND THE LEGISLATIVE  
ASSEMBLY AND EXECUTIVE COUNCIL  
ACT

**MR. HAWKINS:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I wish to present to the House Bill 1, An Act to Amend the Legislative Assembly and Executive Council Act to be read for the first time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you. Pursuant to Rule 8.2(3), Bill 1 is deemed to have first reading and is ready for second reading.

First reading of bills. Second reading of bills. Consideration in Committee of the Whole of Bills and Other Matters, Minister's Statement 4-20(1), Minister's Statement 5-20(1), Tabled

Document 20-20(1), Tabled Document 29-20(1), with Member from Tu Nedhe-Wiilideh in the chair.

### Consideration in Committee of the Whole of Bills and Other matters

**CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Edjericon):** Thank you. I now call Committee of the Whole to order. What is the wish of the committee? To the Deh Cho MLA.

**MRS. YAKELAYA:** Mr. Chair, I move that the chair rise and report progress. Thank you.

**CHAIRPERSON (Mr. Edjericon):** Committee, we will proceed with the first item.

There's a motion on the floor to report progress. The motion is in order and non-debatable. All those in favour? All those opposed? Thank you. Motion carried.

---Carried

I will now rise and report progress. Mahsi.

### Report of Committee of the Whole

**MR. SPEAKER:** May I have the report of the Committee of the Whole.

**MR. EDJERICON:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Your committee has been considering Minister's Statement 4-20(1), 5-20(1), and 17-20(1), and Tabled Document 28-20(1), and 29-20(1), and would like to report progress. And, Mr. Speaker, I move the report of Committee of the Whole be concurred with. Thank you.

**MR. SPEAKER:** Thank you, Member from Tu Nedhe Wiilideh. Do I have a seconder for the report of the Committee of the Whole? Member from Thebacha. The motion is in order and non-debatable. All those in favour? Opposed? Those abstaining? The motion has been carried, and the report of the Committee of the Whole has been concurred with.

---Carried

Third reading of bills. Orders of the day, Mr. Clerk.

### Orders of the Day

**CLERK OF THE HOUSE (Mr. Glen Rutland):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Orders of the day for Friday, February 23rd, 2024, 10 a.m.

1. Prayer
2. Ministers' Statements



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|---|--|
| 3. Members' Statements  | - Tabled Document 29-20(1):<br>Supplementary Estimates<br>(Operations Expenditures), No. 4,<br>2023-2024                             |
| 4. Returns to Oral Questions  |  |
| - Oral Question 62-20(1):<br>Consultation with Members of the<br>Legislative Assembly on Policies<br>and Strategies | 21. Report of Committee of the Whole<br>22. Third Reading of Bills   |
| 5. Recognition of Visitors in the Gallery   | 23. Orders of the Day  |
| 6. Acknowledgements   | Thank you, Mr. Speaker.  |
| 7. Oral Questions   | <b>MR. SPEAKER:</b> Thank you, Mr. Clerk. This<br>House stands adjourned until Friday, February<br>23rd, 2024, at 10 a.m. Thank you. |
| 8. Written Questions  |  |
| 9. Returns to Written Questions   | ---ADJOURNMENT   |
| 10. Replies to the Commissioner's<br>Address  | The House adjourned at 5:44 p.m.   |
| 11. Petitions   |  |
| 12. Reports of Committees on the Review<br>of Bills   |  |
| 13. Reports of Standing and Special<br>Committees   |  |
| 14. Tabling of Documents  |  |
| 15. Notices of Motion   |  |
| 16. Motions   |  |
| 17. Notice of Motion for First Reading of<br>Bills  |  |
| 18. First Reading of Bills  |  |
| - Bill 2: Missing Person's Act  |  |
| 19. Second Reading of Bills   |  |
| - Bill 1: An Act to Amend the<br>Legislative Assembly and<br>Executive Council Act                                  |  |
| 20. Consideration in Committee of the<br>Whole of Bills and Other Matters   |  |
| - Minister's Statement 4-20(1):<br>2023 Wildfire Season Review and<br>Planning for the 2024 Season                  |  |
| - Minister's Statement 5-20(1):<br>Emergency Management<br>Preparation  |  |
| - Minister's Statement 17-20(1):<br>Reaching Average \$10 a day<br>Child Care in the NWT                            |  |
| - Tabled Document 28-20(1):<br>Supplementary Estimates<br>(Infrastructure Expenditures), No.<br>3, 2023-2024        |  |

