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Member's Statement On Fiscal Realities Facing The Government Of The Northwest Territories

MR. RAMSAY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'm going to utilize my Member's statement today to comment on the financial reality that the government of the Northwest Territories finds itself in. Mr. Speaker, let's go back five short years ago to a time when the NWT included the territory of Nunavut. The territorial budget at that time was approximately \$1 billion. April 1, 1999 brought us the creation of the territory of Nunavut. The NWT budget, five short years later for 2004-2005, is just shy of \$1 billion. To me, this sets off many alarm bells, Mr. Speaker. Five years later and the budget is exactly the same as where it was when we had to administer and govern Nunavut in some of the most far-reaching places in this country – a scary story, Mr. Speaker.

The previous government was allowed to spend money at a sickening rate. Any windfalls were quickly spent with political promises and pet projects. They continued to allow the proliferation of boards and agencies throughout the territory. Some might even add that they're now seen as economic development in the regions. There are a number of professional board sitters out there, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we must grab the reigns of our spending immediately. The regular Members, because of the timing of the election, have not had the benefit of going through a complete budget cycle. We went straight into the review of the draft Main Estimates and, as a new Member, I must say that the process in and of itself was a real eye opener. I did know coming in that our financial situation was bleak, but I was shocked to learn really how poor it is.

It certainly is a very scary reality if we continue to spend ourselves silly. In two years, our accumulated debt will be a staggering \$500 million. Yes, that's half a billion dollars. Running a government with an operating deficit is something that we must remedy, and remedy soon. It's just not right and should not be allowed to happen.

Mr. Speaker, this government spends approximately 35 percent of its total budget on administrative overhead. In the next four years, it is my goal to see this number reduced and to get more money on the ground – in the communities and into some tangible, real benefits for the people who call this territory home.

We're very quick to point fingers at Ottawa for our financial difficulties. I will be one of the first to stand up and say that we do need firm commitments from them to go forward. However, some of the responsibility, Mr. Speaker and my fellow colleagues, rests with us. We have to manage what we are given and what we have more effectively. I'm looking forward to working collectively with both the government and our committees to see that together we can tackle some of our bad spending habits. The 14th Legislative Assembly did not know how to say no. In fact, I doubt they could even spell it, Mr. Speaker.

--- Laughter

Whether we like it or not, the word “no” is going to have to be in our vocabulary. Our future is bright, our economy has never been stronger, we're moving ahead with our relationships with both the federal government and our aboriginal governments. The time is now that we, as a group, manage our resources and our finances much more effectively. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.