

Williams attacks 'predatory' Quebec over hydro

N.S. minister says Charest should 'mind his own business'

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Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams is accusing the government of Quebec of trying to block two provinces' plans to transmit hydroelectric power.

Williams told reporters in St. John's on Thursday he has learned that Quebec filed a written complaint with Prime Minister Stephen Harper about an application by Nova Scotia and Nalcor, Newfoundland and Labrador's Crown-owned energy corporation.

The two Atlantic provinces submitted a request to the federal government in late June, Williams said, for federal infrastructure funding to defray the cost of landing a power line in Nova Scotia from Newfoundland. The line could potentially handle power generated from the proposed Lower Churchill hydroelectric megaproject in central Labrador.

Williams said he was astonished to learn that the Quebec government is trying to halt any such support, which he said could be tantamount to trying to kill it.

"I don't know what gives Quebec, or the government of Quebec or the premier of Quebec, the right under any circumstances to object to an application for funding by four other provinces that have nothing to do with Quebec," he said.

Williams has had a tempestuous relationship with Quebec officials, particularly after regulators in Quebec in May dismissed Nalcor's bid to move power to U.S. markets on Quebec's transmission system.

"They don't want us to go through Quebec, and now they don't want us to go anywhere," Williams said.

"I think these are really very predatory competitive practices and I don't like it, and I'm not going to put up with it."

Williams said that while Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador submitted the joint proposal, it would also benefit New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

Calls to the office of Quebec Premier Jean Charest were not immediately returned Thursday and the Prime Minister's Office declined to comment on the matter.

Objection to subsidy

Williams said he understood that Quebec's objection is directed at Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia receiving a federal subsidy on their proposal.

"Quebec avails of many programs whereby they get assistance to promote their industries and create employment, and I welcome that," Williams said. "But leave us alone."

Meanwhile, Nova Scotia Energy Minister Bill Estabrooks also weighed in, saying Charest appeared to be opposing what he called "a good shared partnership" between two other provinces.

"In my opinion, the premier of Quebec should mind his own business," Estabrooks said in an interview Thursday.

"He's dismissing a very valid idea which comes from two provinces that have worked very carefully in terms of giving a reliable energy service to our provinces."

Estabrooks noted that Newfoundland and Labrador has had an often rocky history with Quebec because of the 65-year contract with the Upper Churchill hydroelectric project, in which Hydro-Quebec has been able to resell energy generated in Labrador to U.S. markets at a significant profit.

"There's a lot of politics involved in this," Estabrooks said. "Let the federal government judge this proposal, which we've put in with Newfoundland and Labrador, on its merits. Let's keep the politics out of it."

Williams said he expects that the federal government will make a decision that does not bow to another province's wishes.

"The Quebec government has always had a sphere of influence. I think that's waning," he said.

"I think Canadians are finally wising up to the fact that Quebec can't blackmail Canada because it has a certain number of seats. ... Quebec has a legitimate place in Canada ... but when we have a situation when one province is deliberately trying to thwart at least two other provinces, and indirectly affect four other provinces, that's sad."