

Danny Williams says PUB report 'baffling,' shows bias

Former premier slams 'indecisive nature' of Muskrat Falls review

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Former premier Danny Williams has waded into the Muskrat Falls debate, saying he is “deeply disappointed in the indecisive nature” of a report by the Public Utilities Board report released Monday.

Williams said past comments by the PUB have shown a bias against the project.

“I have never before seen a quasi-judicial body make such negative and prejudicial statements in the middle of a review,” Williams said in a statement emailed to CBC News.

“It concerned me greatly at the time, but I had hoped those careless comments would not have carried over into the final report. Clearly, those opinions formed the basis of the final document as the board had backed itself into a corner several months ago with such strong statements.”

The former premier, who announced the Muskrat Falls deal in November 2010 shortly before exiting politics, said he still supports the energy initiative.

“I am concerned that perhaps the board wanted to wash their hands of any responsibility of this project in the very unlikely event that something goes wrong,” Williams noted.

“The history of the Upper Churchill is a powerful force in this province and some people are just simply too fearful of the ghost of ‘Churchill past’ to move forward with what is a great project. But we must never fear making bold decisions for great rewards.”

Williams says it is unacceptable that the PUB could not reach a recommendation after nine months and millions of dollars in spending.

He claims the board gave too much credence to former bureaucrats and academia, while “ignoring the world-class experts at Nalcor.”

Critical review

Williams’s comments come a day after the PUB declared it did not have enough information to determine whether the Muskrat Falls hydro project is the best long-term power option for Newfoundland.

The board said there were “gaps in Nalcor’s information and analysis” in several areas related to the project, and noted that it was forced to use outdated information in carrying out its review.

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—*Danny Williams*

The day of the PUB report's release, the Tory government announced concessions on a number of matters related to the project.

Those include a promise of further analysis, the tabling of reports on natural gas and wind options for Newfoundland's energy needs, and a pledge to hold a special debate in the legislature on Muskrat Falls.

PUB chair Andy Wells has clashed with project proponents Nalcor Energy in the past. In January, Wells said Nalcor was not co-operating with the board's review, calling it a "torturous process."

Williams appeared to take particular umbrage at those previous remarks.

"Unfortunately, if you look back at the comments made by [the] board early in this process it became clear that opinions had already been formed," he said in a statement.

Tumultuous history

Wells and Williams have a tumultuous history.

They were bitter political enemies for much of Wells's time in municipal politics, as councillor, deputy mayor and finally mayor of St. John's.

But the two reached a detente after Williams became premier in 2003.

Williams attempted to appoint Wells chair of the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board — an effort that was ultimately foiled by federal opposition.

Wells was instead slotted into the top job at the PUB. In 2008, Williams said he "steadfast confidence" in Wells's abilities and experience in that role.

"He is eminently qualified and I am extremely confident he will be a valuable asset in that organization," Williams said at the time.

Contacted by CBC News Friday morning, before the PUB's report was delivered to the government, Wells had only two words: "No comment."