

On Point | Kennedy defends shift in Muskrat tone

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Natural Resources Minister Jerome Kennedy says the Newfoundland and Labrador government is not backpedaling in how it is handling the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project, even though the governing Tories are already planning measures they had ruled out.

At the same time, Kennedy — this week's guest on On Point with David Cochrane — blamed the Public Utilities Board itself for failing to do its work properly, on the heels of the PUB reporting this week it was not given sufficient material from Crown-owned Nalcor to make an adequate decision on the merits of the multi-billion-dollar Muskrat Falls project.

Asked if the PUB report came back to bite the government, Kennedy replied, "I think it came back to bite them."

Kennedy chided the PUB for not understanding what it been asked to do, including working with cost estimates that it knew would not be final projections.

"It just showed a lack of respect for the process on their part, a failure to comply with their statutory mandate," Kennedy said.

The government announced this week that it will hold a special debate on Muskrat Falls, and will also study alternatives — such as wind and natural gas — that it had only days ago said were unnecessary.

Kennedy, who had said he is "not going to lose any sleep over" a possible decision to not sanction Muskrat Falls, said he still believes the plan to tap power on Labrador's Churchill River is sound.

"I believe today, based on what I know, that Muskrat Falls is the best option. However, there will be a lot of information (expected to) come forward in the next month or two," he said.

Kennedy said the special debate at the house of assembly will not proceed until Nalcor can provide the estimates for the final decision-making stage, known as Decision Gate 3.

"Nothing will go to the house of assembly without the Decision Gate 3 numbers," he said.

'Remove themselves from the rhetoric'

Meanwhile, the On Point pundit panel raked over this week's shift in tone within the provincial government over Muskrat Falls.

"The government and the minister have recognized that they need to get back to the project," said former Tory cabinet minister Shawn Skinner.

"[They need to] remove themselves from the rhetoric and the politics of it, turn down the heat a bit, and focus on the benefits of the project."

Also participating in the panel are former Liberal MP Siobhan Coady and Federation of Labour president Lana Payne.