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Minister rebranded

Natural Resources Minister Jerome Kennedy seemed comfortable Monday, facing reporters and editors in a Telegram boardroom to answer questions about Muskrat Falls. It's a different kind of style for Kennedy, a carefully planned, almost laid-back approach to dealing with questions and concerns about the multi-billion-dollar project.

In the past, he says, he and other members of the Dunderdale government may have been too chippy and reactive about dealing with concerns about the project; answering every single concern has only made the government look defensive about its defining megaproject.

He's clearly trying to sell that relaxed stance: "What we're trying to do is to give people that degree of comfort that as a government we've done a good job in terms of providing the information they require. ... No, I don't think that we have done a great job of communicating this and I can give you a couple of examples myself that I've done. One is, 'No debate! No debate!' Then a week later, 'OK, let's have a debate now.' That's not good communication." He's echoing Premier Kathy Dunderdale. Here's the premier from a recent media scrum: "We're trying not to overload people with information. So a steady progression of reports are being released to address the questions that have been raised publicly, either by opposition parties, by interested individuals, by some groups who have organized against the project and so on. So every possible piece of information that we can provide to the people of the province over the next couple of weeks before we go in to debate in the House of Assembly, we're going to do that."

It's a clear change from earlier this year, when the government's position with Muskrat critics could be loosely paraphrased as, "You're all idiots, you don't know what you're talking about and you're all wrong."

How much is truly a new approach, and how much is simple optics, designed to mollify an electorate that's showing signs of unease with pitbull politics?

Well, optics are always an integral part of politics.

The next couple of weeks will show whether the new, calmer approach is something that's been pinned on, or whether it runs deeper.

Because, meanwhile, on another front, Government House Leader Darin King is trying to lay down the law with opposition parties about what a House of Assembly debate on Muskrat Falls will look like.

We all understand that there are games in politics. But this project is too big and too expensive to be a political football.

Canning the father-knows-best attitude is a good first step. Listening carefully to public concerns could well be another.

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