

NL legislature votes to approve Muskrat Falls

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The Newfoundland and Labrador legislature has passed a motion to approve the Muskrat Falls hydro project.

The symbolic vote, based on a private member's resolution by Premier Kathy Dunderdale, took place in the House of Assembly Wednesday afternoon during .

"Mr. Speaker, the project to develop Muskrat Falls is an undertaking of historic proportion," Dunderdale said.

In the end, only six of the 48 MHAs had a chance to speak, including Dunderdale, Natural Resources Minister Jerome Kennedy, and Child, Youth and Family Services Minister Charlene Johnson for the Tories; Liberal Leader Dwight Ball and colleague Yvonne Jones; and NDP Leader Lorraine Michael, whose time was cut short.

The vote broke down along party lines with the motion passing 36 to 10.

Liberal Jim Bennett was absent and independent Tom Osborne voted in favour of the project.

The exercise was largely symbolic and has little or no impact on whether the project will actually go ahead.

Kennedy also touted the importance of the project.

"One important benefit of Muskrat Falls, and let's not underestimate this Mr. Speaker, is that we escape the clutches of Quebec," he said.

Opposition upset

The two-hour proceeding is the only time that the legislature will have a formal debate on the multibillion-dollar hydroelectric megaproject. That's because the parties couldn't agree on a format for a full debate.

The opposition parties wanted to call expert witnesses during a special debate, but that was rejected by the government.

"I will always ask for debate that means something that is not a charade," said Ball. "We asked for witnesses, you were afraid to give us access to the witnesses. That is exactly what happened."

Michael was also upset with the proceedings.

"We are into a totally non-democratic process with this discussion here today. It is the largest expenditure this province will ever make," she said.

"The arrogance of a government that thinks that it knows best without listening to the people of the province as represented in the House of Assembly is as close to dictatorial as one can imagine in a democratic society."

Jones said the government is forgetting an important component in the hydro project.

"Mr. Speaker, once again we are seeing the people of Labrador being left out of one of the major development projects on our land," she said.

The formal sanctioning decision for Muskrat Falls will be made by cabinet, not in the legislature.

Dunderdale has said the project will be sanctioned before the end of the year.

Williams watched from gallery

As MHAs bickered in the legislature, Danny Williams, the former premier who announced the Muskrat Falls project in 2010, watched from the public gallery.

"I think it's also symbolic," he said.

"I think this is just a really important day in the history of the province."

Protest outside

Meanwhile, the People's Assembly protested outside Confederation Building on Wednesday afternoon.

The group of about a dozen people held a mock wake denouncing the type of debate that took place for the Muskrat Falls project in the House of Assembly.

Protester Angela Reccord said it doesn't bode well for democracy in the province.

"It's really the death of democracy surrounding the debate on Muskrat Falls," she said.

"There's been so many calls for the Public Utilities Board to be recalled, and for there to be more public debate on the issue. We feel that democracy is not being served by the current government."