

Talk alone won't restore university's standing: Jones

BY CORY HURLEY

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Yvonne

Jones is not convinced tough talk is going to restore the public's faith in Memorial University's appearance of autonomy.

The Liberal leader was referring to the stand taken by Bob Simmonds, chairman of the board of regents, in laying down the terms of how the search for a new president will unfold without any interference. Without such independence, the hard-nosed lawyer said he will quit his position.

"I certainly admire Mr. Simmonds for trying to bring some credibility to this process again," Jones told *The Western Star* in Corner Brook last week. "We will have to wait and see what happens, but I am not entirely convinced that government will not interfere, either in the early stages or the latter stages of it."

The Opposition leader said Premier Danny Williams and Education Minister Joan Burke felt they didn't do anything wrong in interfering with the presidential selection the first time.

"Maybe they did learn a lesson, I don't know, but it was quite obvious to me that nothing has changed from a legislative perspective from then, when the minister felt it was her job to interfere, until this point, where she says she will stay out of it."

Confidence in chairman

Meanwhile, Burke, who was in Corner Brook for the official opening of the new Corner Brook Regional High School Monday, said she has confidence in Simmonds' ability to effectively chair a search for a new president. She said the transparent process is being supported by the government.

"Once the name comes forward, we will certainly follow our process to bring it to cabinet," she said. "I don't want to pre-judge anything about what we are going to do or are not going to do. ... We are aware of the process, we support the process, so I wouldn't want to say anything now that would interrupt that or would put a different spin on it or make it look like we are not on the same team here."

Meanwhile, the search for a new president and the process of granting autonomy to Sir Wilfred Grenfell College in Corner Brook seems to have been lumped together in its lengthy delay.

Jones said a new president isn't needed to develop the appropriate legislation and bring it to the House of Assembly. However, after the initial indication it was a priority, nothing has happened since. Her understanding is no legislation will come forth in the spring session.

"They were very adamant about doing this and now my sense is they are backing off and they've backed off a tremendous distance," she said, adding word is there will be no separate boards of regents or governance committees.

"In a concept that was supposed to provide western Newfoundland with their own university, it certainly seems there is a lot more merging going on as the process continues and there's no legislation from government to act on the commitment at all."

Burke said the commitment still stands and will happen under the current government. Things will happen when the "timing is appropriate," she said, reluctant to put any timelines

Things will happen when the "timing is appropriate," she said, reluctant to put any timelines on when.

"Our commitment has not changed," she said. "I think there has been some sound rationale as to why Grenfell should be more autonomous as an institution and we certainly have not backtracked on our opinion."

She called it ironic for Jones to pass comment, given the former Liberal administration was satisfied with not giving the west coast campus "any" autonomy.