

Opposition persistent

Calls for third party to investigate byelection, minister stands by chief electoral officer as issue raised in House

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The Liberals and the NDP still want an investigation into the 2001 byelection in St. Barbe, but both agree Paul Reynolds shouldn't be the one to do it.

Reynolds — the province's chief electoral officer — came under fire last week after he refused to investigate the byelection.

Questions were also raised about Reynolds' objectivity, as he is a former Progressive Conservative party president.

Earlier this month, it was revealed in an agreed statement of facts in provincial court former Tory leader Ed Byrne paid \$3,000 from his constituency allowance to a PC organizer who was working on the 2001 byelection.

In a news release last week, Reynolds said, "There is no evidence that anyone other than Mr. Byrne was involved in a deliberate attempt to manipulate funds or to otherwise fraudulently circumvent the provisions of ... the Elections Act."

In the House of Assembly Monday, Liberal justice critic Kelvin Parsons asked the province for an independent third party to investigate the matter and make sure no other money was inappropriately used during the byelection.

He directed his questions to deputy premier Kathy Dunderdale, as Premier Danny Williams was not in the House.

Outside the House, Dunderdale told reporters the government has confidence in Reynolds.

She was also asked if she thought Reynolds is in a conflict of interest, considering his past as a PC party organizer.

"No, I don't believe so," Dunderdale replied.

"It's like journalists becoming politicians and ... you question whether or not they had a bias when they were reporting on political activities," she said.

Dunderdale said ethical and responsible people can be objective no matter what their affiliations are.

She also said there is nothing wrong with the current scrutiny of Reynolds, but she maintained the government is satisfied with his decision.

But Parsons told reporters that Reynolds made his decision without gathering any facts except for a couple of phone calls to people inside the PC party.

"How could he be the judge and the jury of whether anything was or was not right when he hasn't even taken the time to go investigate it?" asked Parsons.

He said because Reynolds jumped to that conclusion, someone independent should be appointed to carry out an investigation.

Parsons also said if Reynolds continues to say an investigation is unnecessary, the House should remove him as chief electoral officer.

NDP Leader Lorraine Michael said her party's president has written a letter to Reynolds asking for an investigation.

But she agrees with Parsons that Reynolds should step back and let someone else look into the matter.

"I think what would have to happen now is somebody else would have to do the investigation," she said.