

Premier 'dead wrong' on trade talks: Jones

N.L. issues will suffer if province not at table

BY ROB ANTLE

THE TELEGRAM

The premier's decision to boycott Ottawa-led trade talks with the European Union is a bad move, Opposition Leader Yvonne Jones says.

"I think the premier is dead wrong on this one," Jones told The Telegram in an interview.

"I have no problem with the fact that he likes to take strong stands against the federal government. ... But I don't think his approach this time is in the best interests of the people of the province."

Premier Danny Williams reiterated in the legislature this week that Newfoundland and Labrador will not join Canada-EU trade negotiations. Williams said Ottawa can't be trusted to act in the province's best interests. He also lashed out at the Europeans, calling them "hypocrites" for a recent vote to ban commercial seal products.

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EU won't talk to premier, Jones says

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An EU diplomat has flatly rejected the idea that Newfoundland and Labrador could negotiate its own bilateral arrangement — an idea Williams had previously floated.

That, said Jones, means the province has to work with Ottawa, or not have any representation for Newfoundland and Labrador issues at the negotiating table.

"I know that he has some concern that the Government of Canada may not be representing the interests of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians in the way he would like, but at the end of the day, they are our only option to have a voice at that table," Jones said.

"The EU has said (it is) not going to negotiate with Newfoundland and Labrador. They're not going to negotiate with Danny Williams as the premier. So therefore we have to depend upon the federal government, whether he likes it or not."

Jones stressed that there are "major issues" for the province on the table during Canada-EU negotiations. She cited seafood tariffs as one example. Currently, the EU imposes a 20 per cent tariff on imports of Canadian shrimp above the threshold of 20,000 tonnes. Until 2007, the limit was 7,000 tonnes.

Shrimp below the threshold are hit with a six per cent tariff.

The issue has been a long-standing concern in Newfoundland and Labrador. The landed value of the province's shrimp industry was \$186 million in 2008.

Jones said the fishery is "very vulnerable" right now, and the tariff issue is a vital one.

"Any time that we can eliminate barriers in the marketplace, and allow that industry to grow more wealth for the people of the province, we've got to be able to do it," she said.

All other provinces and territories support the Ottawa-EU negotiations.

Talks formally kicked off in Prague earlier this month, with a wide array of issues on the table.

According to the federal government, the Canada-EU partnership has the potential to bring a \$12-billion boost to the Canadian economy.