

Fowl play?

Parsons accuses Dunderdale of deception, evasiveness at chicken marketing board

BY DAVE BARTLETT dbartlett@thetelegram.com

THE TELEGRAM

Liberal Kelvin Parsons says the Natural Resources minister has been “deceptive and evasive” about possible financial irregularities at the province’s chicken marketing board.

Parsons told reporters outside the House of Assembly Tuesday, Kathy Dunderdale told the House in December 2008, and again last month, there were no irregularities.

But after question period Monday, Dunderdale told the House a report on the matter done by the province’s comptroller general has now gone to the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC).

Parsons grilled Dunderdale on the matter during question period Tuesday, and outside the House told reporters her continual contention there were no irregularities was obviously wrong.

“It’s our position that the minister was well aware of this back when we asked about it last fall,” he said.

Parsons said it’s another example of the government being anything but open and transparent, as it claims.

“Unless you keep their feet to the fire, constantly, and only when they are absolutely forced to, will they reveal any information,” he said.

Parsons pointed out there were enough irregularities at the for Dunderdale to change protocols, put new checks and balances into place and to turn the matter over to the police and the province’s auditor general.

He also questioned the minister’s refusal to table the report in the House before it’s reviewed again.

When pressed about what financial irregularities he’s heard about, Parsons said he doesn’t know for sure because he hasn’t seen the report.

But he said sources he’s talked to say public funds may have been misused and travel claims may also be in question.

Parsons also said he’s heard a director of the board or an assistant deputy minister in Dunderdale’s department was asked to retire over this issue.

Dunderdale told reporters she’s been diligently trying to find out the facts surrounding the issue.

She said a reporter called her in the spring of 2008 about someone being dismissed from the board over financial irregularities.

Dunderdale said she looked into the matter at the time, but found nothing wrong.

When the Opposition raised it before Christmas, she again looked into the



Kelvin Parsons



Kathy Dunderdale

matter.

Dunderdale said her staff went to the RNC to see if it would investigate, but were told unless there was evidence of wrongdoing the police couldn't get involved.

She got the same response from a private accountant as when she tried to get an external audit done.

"If I were interested in covering ... I could have left it there," Dunderdale said.

But instead, Dunderdale said she went to the province's comptroller who sent her his report while the House was in recess over the Easter break.

Dunderdale said while he didn't find anything criminal either, he found a lack of protocols around financial management of the board.

"To close this loop, and make sure that I've done everything I ought to do as minister, I referred the report to the RNC," Dunderdale said and added that the auditor general was also given the report.

She said new financial protocols are now in place at the board.

While she'll wait to see if the RNC find anything amiss, Dunderdale said there is still no assumption anything criminal took place.

"I know that there was very sloppy financial management at the chicken marketing board," said Dunderdale. But she said the department has now dealt with that. Dunderdale also denied any senior official in her department was let go over the matter.