

Meeting on controversial legislation degenerates into shouting match

BY ANGELA HALL, THE LEADER-POST NOVEMBER 27, 2009

A committee meeting turned into a shouting match Thursday as MLAs clashed over controversial changes to labour legislation affecting the construction industry.

With the governing Saskatchewan Party backing Bill 80 and the NDP Opposition staunchly opposed, it took little to inflame debate.

Labour Minister Rob Norris was appearing before the committee to answer members' questions about the bill, which would, among other changes: allow new unions into Saskatchewan's construction industry; permit wall-to-wall certifications of a job site instead of having all unionized construction workers belong to the craft union associated with their trade, and; introduce provisions around union abandonment.

The unrest among members peaked after committee chairman Greg Ottenbreit, a Sask. Party MLA, tapped fellow Sask. Party MLA Serge LeClerc to start the questioning, prompting an outcry from the NDP, a fresh barrage of insults and two qualified apologies.

LeClerc said he was sorry for telling the NDP to "shut up and listen."

"I lost my temper when I heard the leader of the Opposition call me a dummy and my fellow MLA a liar," LeClerc said.

In turn, NDP Leader Dwain Lingenfelter said that if LeClerc "heard me call him a dummy, I apologize for that. Again, in the heat of the moment, I think people say things that are inappropriate."

The two men were later seen having a verbal exchange in the rotunda of the legislature and LeClerc could be heard confronting Lingenfelter about his comments.

Ottenbreit said he was disappointed in the decorum during the meeting.

"My perception is the NDP pretty much threw a tantrum when it didn't seem like they were getting their way," Ottenbreit said, adding that he, too, was subject to insults.

Although the meeting eventually progressed, neither side got the outcome it wanted.

The NDP wanted more time in committee to ask questions, but the meeting was adjourned after two hours.

"We feel we've lived up to the commitments we made initially and the process will carry on," Ottenbreit said.

But due to a lack of agreement between the parties, Bill 80 likely won't pass until the end of the spring sitting in May 2010. The government had hoped it would pass next week.

The committee deputy chairman, NDP member Cam Broten, accused government members of dodging discussion of the bill for weeks.

"We have more questions for the minister on this issue," Broten said. "From the get-go the government's approach was to hijack it, railroad it and to not give the information that's needed by Saskatchewan people."

Watching the committee process unfold on Thursday was a group of unionized construction workers who have called Bill 80 unneeded, as well as representatives of business groups who call it a tool to strengthen the construction industry.

The Saskatchewan Provincial Building & Construction Trades Council has said the bill has many flaws, including that it would create two systems, with one set of rules for existing unions that organize by trade and another for out-of-province contractors and unions.

Council business manager Terry Parker also criticized the government for convening the committee meeting with limited notice.

But Alan Thomarat of the Home Builders' Association said the legislation is about ensuring Saskatchewan is a competitive environment. "Certainly (with Bill 80) what you're seeing is more choice for unions, more choices for workers that actually will ironically see more unions in the province of Saskatchewan than we have right now," Thomarat said.

About 20 per cent of the construction industry in Saskatchewan is currently unionized.