

Pam Frampton: Mixed messages

The Telegram

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Former members of the board of directors of Nalcor Energy are questioned at the Muskrat Falls Inquiry, Oct. 16, by inquiry co-counsel Kate O'Brien. From left are Tom Clift, Ken Marshall, Terry Styles and Gerry Shortall. — Telegram file photo

Former Nalcor board chair acknowledged relationship at inquiry; threatened legal action over its mention in 2012

At the Muskrat Falls inquiry on Oct. 16th, Stephenville businessman Terry Styles acknowledged in testimony that he'd been involved in a romantic relationship with cabinet minister Joan Burke at the time of his appointment as chairman of the board of directors for Nalcor and Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro in June 2012.



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During questioning by Concerned Citizens Coalition counsel Geoff Budden, Styles pointed out that he had been recommended to the board by the premier's office, not by Burke.

But the relationship between Styles and Burke wasn't always so clear. In the days following his appointment, Styles — through a lawyer — told The Telegram a website comment describing him as Joan Burke's boyfriend was untrue.

It had been publicly reported that Styles was a top contributor to Burke's election campaigns in 2003 and 2007 and that she, as Education minister, had appointed him as chairman of the board of College of the North Atlantic in 2009.

In 2012, when Styles was among those named to the boards of Nalcor and Hydro, the appointments sparked controversy.

Then Opposition Leader Dwight Ball charged the appointees lacked expertise in the energy field and contended they were political appointments, telling The Telegram, "Nalcor is a multibillion-dollar company making some of the biggest decisions that we've had to make in the history of our province and I just (can't) believe that we couldn't find anybody out there willing to go on this board that could provide the type of expertise that's required to develop a megaproject..."

Premier Kathy Dunderdale would brook no criticism, and when Styles' appointment was raised in the House of Assembly, she and Ball sparred.

Ball: "Mr. Speaker, on Friday the government quietly announced the appointments to the board of directors of Nalcor. They appointed Mr. Terry Styles as chair, even though he has no experience in energy or large-scale projects. I ask the premier: At such an important time in our history of this province and with the sanctioning of Muskrat Falls looming, why did you make such an inexperienced decision?"

Dunderdale: "Mr. Speaker, I find this line of questioning absolutely offensive. ... I am delighted to have Terry Styles as chair of Nalcor, Mr. Speaker, an experienced businessperson in this province who has a vast experience, not only in business but of education, and is credible, is principled. We all should be grateful to have him, Mr. Speaker, not casting aspersions on him here in the House of Assembly."

Ball: "This is not about the individual. There are few checks and balances in place at Nalcor, and a strong board is required to hold the managers accountable..."

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Of course, journalists were covering the debate, and members of the public were weighing in.

On July 5, 2012, someone calling themselves "Elizabeth" commented on The Telegram's website on a story about a poll showing slipping support for Dunderdale's Progressive Conservatives. "Why would they appoint Joan Burkes (sic) boyfriend chair of the board of directors for Nalcor and Hydro?"

Shortly after, a lawyer with Rogers Bussey called The Telegram on behalf of a vacationing fellow lawyer whose client objected to the comment. I asked if the comment was factually incorrect, explaining that we couldn't simply unpublish comments from our website on the strength of a phone call.

He called back later to say the client in question was Terry Styles, and that Styles wanted the comment removed because he was not in a relationship with Burke. I told him I would need that in writing.

Meanwhile, The Telegram unpublished the comment as a show of good faith. That afternoon, I received an email from Styles' lawyer, David Bussey, with the subject line "Terry Styles."

He wrote: "My associate advises me that he was speaking with you this morning and requested that you remove a comment from an online article concerning our client, Terry Styles and Minister Joan Burke. Apparently you refused to remove this untrue, defamatory and spurious comment. You are hereby put on notice that if the said comment is not immediately removed from your website, we have been instructed to commence an action for defamation of character and harassment.

"I trust that further legal action will not be necessary."

I contacted Styles Tuesday and asked if he could explain the discrepancy between his inquiry testimony last week and his lawyer's letter to The Telegram in 2012.

He replied via email on Thursday: "...as best I can recall, I asked legal counsel to address my concerns because I felt the commentary inferred that a personal relationship was the basis of my appointment, which was simply untrue and a misrepresentation."

I make no judgment as to why Styles received the appointment in 2012.

But, if he and Burke were romantically involved at the time, that information should have been disclosed publicly — she was a cabinet minister and he had accepted a government appointment to a key position overseeing what was then a megaproject expected to cost the province more than \$6 billion. In the years since, it has more than doubled in price.

Surely, the people of the province deserved all the openness and transparency that Burke's government was fond of touting at the time.

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