



Nfld. & Labrador

'There was no bullying, sir': Muskrat manager denies he contributed to cost overruns



Scott O'Brien defended his qualifications as manager for the generation project at Muskrat

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A senior manager with the team overseeing construction the Muskrat Falls project, Scott O'Brien, defended his behaviour and qualifications during testimony at a public inquiry Friday. (Terry Roberts/CBC)

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Multiple witnesses have testified he was heavy handed and a bully, and his behaviour was symbolic of a project management team that was unfit to oversee the Muskrat Falls project.

But Scott O'Brien fired back — in measured tones — Friday, defending his leadership style and his qualifications as a core member of Nalcor's management team.

"People weren't bullied, sir," said O'Brien.

"People were held accountable for the requirements that were established for them."

Two tense days of testimony

O'Brien concluded two tense days of testimony at the public inquiry investigating why Muskrat Falls is billions over budget and years behind schedule.

He kept his cool but didn't accept any responsibility for the problems at Muskrat. As he did on Thursday, O'Brien put much of the blame on Astaldi. He also continued his criticism of SNC-Lavalin, saying the Quebec engineering and construction company attempted to undermine the project.

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Testimony from earlier witnesses singled out O'Brien for both his leadership style and his qualifications as Nalcor's project manager for generation, a job that pays him nearly \$1,600 per day.

O'Brien strongly denied that he breached Nalcor's code of conduct, which seem to be the suggestion of Geoff Budden, lawyer for the Muskrat Falls concerned citizens committee.

In fact, O'Brien said the inquiry should use caution in accepting any testimony from Astaldi officials, since the company is trying to extract hundreds of millions in additional payments from Nalcor through an ongoing arbitration process.

"So you believe these allegations are simply a commercial approach?" Budden asked.

"Of course they are," said O'Brien.

'Aggressive, intimidating and demeaning'

At one point in September 2016, a senior Astaldi manager, Don Delarosbil, wrote a letter to O'Brien, saying he would not attend any future meetings with Nalcor's team unless the "aggressive, intimidating and demeaning" behaviour toward him and his team stopped.

During his inquiry testimony, Delarosbil said he was referring directly to O'Brien when he used those words.

“I've been in meetings with Astaldi in which language was used, shouting was used, people have left and stormed out of rooms.”

- Scott O'Brien

O'Brien said that at that time, Astaldi was out of money, had failed to deliver according to its contractual obligations, and was working to forward a significant claim against Nalcor.

When asked why Justice Richard LeBlanc should accept his testimony, O'Brien said: "The contractor's motives are not always aligned with the owner's, and in this case it's patently obvious what Astaldi's motives are."

Another former Astaldi employee, Ed Knox, told the inquiry O'Brien was a bully, arrogant and difficult, and said his management style contributed to the project's cost and schedule overruns.

"He did not listen to anything that most experienced people would put on the table," Knox told the inquiry.

Storming out of rooms

And a former senior manager with SNC Lavalin, Normand Bechard, testified he was subjected to, and witnessed, bullying behaviour by O'Brien.

O'Brien denied any wrongdoing, and stressed his and his team's only motive was to "deliver a project at the lowest possible cost to the people of Newfoundland."

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He did not condone or encourage shouting or unprofessional conduct, O'Brien said, but there had disagreements.

"I can tell you I've been in meetings with Astaldi in which language was used, shouting was used, people have left and stormed out of rooms," O'Brien said.

"I don't condone that either."

O'Brien is a core member of the project team whose job is to oversee development of the hydroelectric generating facility on the Churchill River.

He's an engineer with extensive experience in the oil and gas industry prior to joining Nalcor as an independent consultant.

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Bechard, who testified in March, said O'Brien was not qualified for such a lofty position, since he had no prior hydro experience.

O'Brien denied that, saying he had a long history of project management and was supported by team members with vast backgrounds in hydroelectric developments.

As for Bechard's criticism, O'Brien said the inquiry should remember that, like Astaldi, it's coming from a company that failed to live up to its commitments on the project.

"It was my responsibility as a member of the project team to hold Mr. Bechard accountable with respect to the deliverables that were so sorely lacking with respect to their effort," O'Brien said.

"And that's all that was ever done."

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