

Paris charges racism

Colleagues say heckling of MLA in House is nothing personal
By AMY SMITH Provincial Reporter



The province's only African-Nova Scotian MLA says some of the other politicians have both taunted and ignored him because of the colour of his skin.

Percy Paris, the New Democrat MLA for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank, said Tuesday he has experienced racism ever since he set foot in the House after his election in June.

Mr. Paris said he loves his job and working with his constituents, but it's a different story when the legislature is in session.

"Being in the House of Assembly for me is probably one of the loneliest places I've ever worked," he told reporters.

Mr. Paris said some MLAs from the other two parties have avoided sitting with him in the members lounge even when there are empty chairs around him. He also said that when he rises in the chamber to speak, the level of heckling from the Liberal and Tory benches escalates.

"It's a fine line when that heckling becomes oppressive, and sometimes what is happening in the House of Assembly is the heckling becomes oppressive," Mr. Paris said.

He said he wants to make it clear that he's not talking about all members of the House, adding that some Tory and Liberal MLAs have been friendly and gracious toward him. He did not want to name the MLAs he believes acted inappropriately.

Mr. Paris said raising the issue of racism in the legislature is not an easy thing to do.

"Why would I subject myself to further taunting or further ridicule or further harassment?" he said. "If we want to make Nova Scotia a better place to live . . . we have to call it when it needs to be called, and we should be willing to do something about it and not be in denial."

Mr. Paris said he heard someone in the House utter the phrase "the dark cloud" on Thursday night, when fellow New Democrat Leonard Preyra, who was born in India, rose to vote on a bill. He said he couldn't tell who made the comment, but he thought it came from the Tory benches.

"That didn't have to be directed at me for me to find it offensive," he said.

Mr. Preyra said Tuesday he did not hear the comment. He said the legislature has a bit of an "old boys' kind of a jock mentality," and new members are tested but it doesn't faze him.

"I feel quite comfortable in the legislature," he said. "I feel that I've given as good as I've got."

Speaker Cecil Clarke said he first heard from the media Tuesday about Mr. Paris's allegations of racism. Mr. Clarke said he has obtained video and audiotapes of the last session of the legislature and plans to review them.

He said he hasn't heard from Mr. Paris but said he welcomes a meeting with him.

NDP House leader Kevin Deveau said women and visible minorities in the House are treated with more aggression than other MLAs are.

"I would say every white man in that House has to think about how they react to people who are not white male MLAs," Mr. Deveau said.

"I think we have to be very conscious of the language we use and our reaction when we use it. I'm not asking for any one member to be treated differently; in fact, indeed, I think all members should be treated the same."

But Tory House leader Michael Baker said he has seen no evidence of racism in the legislature.

"I think that what we're seeing here is Mr. Paris's lack of experience as a member of the House of Assembly," Mr. Baker said. "He simply is getting used to the cut and thrust of legislative life."

Mr. Baker said there are many members who have served for two or three terms and have become good acquaintances over time, and Mr. Paris was only elected about six months ago. He said the last two sessions of the House have been quite heated and confrontational.

"It had nothing to do with any individual member of the House of Assembly," he said. "It had to do with there's some philosophical differences . . . between Mr. Paris's party and the other two parties."

Liberal House leader Manning MacDonald said the jeering in the legislature isn't reserved for any one MLA.

"We generally heckle everybody when it's appropriate; if there's an issue that deserves some heckling, we do it," Mr. MacDonald said. "It's got nothing to do with who you are or where you are sitting."

"I've never heckled (Mr. Paris) since he came into the House, personally; have no reason to heckle him."

The Grit said Mr. Paris should identify anyone he feels has treated him badly.

Mr. Paris first publicly raised the matter of racism in the House on Monday, when he was at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish to mark Martin Luther King Day.

Wayne Adams, who was the province's first black MLA and its first black cabinet minister, said Tuesday he didn't feel any hostility from other members because of his race.

"Far from it, actually, from my experience," he said. "It's probably because of the novelty factor as well. That probably had something to do with it."

Mr. Adams said he encountered more obstacles from racism when he was a civil servant than as an elected representative.

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