

# PIGS IN A BLANKET OR HANDS IN YOUR POCKET ? "YOUR" CALL .

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### How did she get her job?

Premier's ex-chief of staff on hot seat for plum posting

Heather Foley Melvin, the head of Conserve Nova Scotia, was questioned by the public accounts committee at Province House on Wednesday. (Darren Pittman / Staff)

By DAVID JACKSON Provincial Reporter

A week after the June 13 election, Heather Foley Melvin walked into a meeting with Premier Rodney Mac-Donald as his chief of staff.

An hour later, she walked out as the chief administrative officer of Conserve Nova Scotia, the energy-efficiency agency that had not yet been created. And she kept her \$131,613.82 salary.

Ms. Foley Melvin wouldn't say during or after her appearance before the public accounts committee Wednesday whether she was fired as chief of staff. Mr. MacDonald said she wasn't.

"Certainly not," he said at Province House. "This agency, Conserve Nova Scotia, will have a long-lasting impact on the people of our province and that is why we felt so strongly about getting the right person in place that can get the job done."

Ms. Foley Melvin didn't challenge comments from the committee about the premier dismissing her as chief of staff, and she neither confirmed nor denied the allegation in a media scrum afterward.

"I was asked during that meeting to take on the role of Conserve Nova Scotia," she told reporters.

The premier and Ms. Foley Melvin were keeping details of the meeting secret, but New Democrat MLA Graham Steele said the information is important for Nova Scotians to know. The official Opposition has asked why Ms. Foley Melvin is good enough to head a provincial agency while it appears she wasn't good enough to be the premier's chief of staff.

"She is drawing a very great deal of the public's money after just having lost another job," Mr. Steele said.

"We need to know, in particular, what deficiencies did the premier identify? I find it very hard to believe, and I think most Nova Scotians would as well, that the premier would dismiss her from one job without any indication of what it was she maybe could have done better."

The New Democrats and Liberals have hammered away at Mr. Mac-Donald since the June 23 announcement of Ms. Foley Melvin's appointment, which they call blatant patronage. Ms. Foley Melvin was a key part of Mr. MacDonald's successful leadership bid, a former president of the provincial party and a candidate for the federal party in 1997.

The opposition has pointed out that she has no experience or background in energy conservation. She was Mazda Canada's Atlantic regional manager before becoming the premier's chief of staff and she has extensive experience in marketing and advertising in the auto industry.

"Even though energy efficiency and the automotive business are very different in a lot of ways, the ability to draw people to a topic and have them accomplish their tasks — have customers come in, have customers buy what they have to sell — is very similar to what we need to accomplish with Conserve Nova Scotia," Ms. Foley Melvin told the committee.

"We need to have Nova Scotians buy in that this is something they can do and move together toward a more energy-efficient Nova Scotia."

Opposition MLAs said they weren't criticizing Ms. Foley Melvin personally but rather the way Mr. MacDonald handled her appointment, without a job competition.

"I think this is indeed going to be an anchor for Premier MacDonald," Liberal MLA Leo Glavine said. "This is a burden that he will carry, and carry into the next election."

"It speaks to Nova Scotians that the old style of politics remains in this province. They saw a young leader, they had hoped that things would, in fact, change. This is Buchanan-esque in the biggest way — a straight patronage appointment."

During the meeting, Ms. Foley Melvin refused to answer some questions and MLAs asked other questions repeatedly before she answered.

That brought an admonishment from Mr. Steele after Ms. Foley Melvin said she was there to tell people more about Conserve Nova Scotia and to say she's the right person to lead the agency.

"The reason you're here today, Ms. Foley Melvin, is because you are a very highly paid public servant," Mr. Steele said. "You got a job without any advertisement, without any competition. It was simply handed to you, and the members of this committee believe that there is a problem with that."

"You are here today to answer the questions that we put to you, not to answer the questions that you choose to answer. I want you to be very, very clear on that."

Liberal MLA Stephen McNeil asked Ms. Foley Melvin eight times whether she supported the government's move to effectively remove the provincial portion of the harmonized sales tax from home heating sources and electricity.

Some critics say making energy cheaper won't encourage conservation.

After Mr. McNeil asked the question for the seventh time, Ms. Foley Melvin said: "I support the government of Nova Scotia." After the eighth, when Mr. McNeil asked for a yes or no answer, she said: "For the short term, I think it's a good value for Nova Scotians."

Conservative MLA Keith Bain said it was hypocritical for Liberals to complain about the tax break after voting in favour of it in the budget vote in July.

Halifax resident Mary MacDonald e-mailed Mr. Steele last month to say how frustrated she was with Ms. Foley Melvin's appointment. Ms. MacDonald said she has two university degrees and an advanced diploma in public relations and has been trying to get a job for five years.

Mr. Glavine said he wants the premier to hold a competition for Ms. Foley Melvin's job. The NDP has said she should resign and has also noted that it appears consultants costing more than \$20,000 have done work she should have done.

Ms. Foley Melvin said she'll use competitions to hire people at Conserve Nova Scotia, which will eventually have 11 full-time staff and has a \$10.6-million budget for the remainder of the fiscal year, which ends next March.

The creation of Conserve Nova Scotia was a Tory campaign promise and the agency was intended to be formed through legislation. That meant MLAs would have debated the proposal in the legislature. Instead, cabinet created the agency through a cabinet order.

Ms. Foley Melvin said the change reflected the fact that Conserve Nova Scotia will be setting policy for Nova Scotians, meaning it has to be close to government as a special operating agency rather than an arm's-length Crown corporation.

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