

Tories accused of seeking public job for ex-aide [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The director of an Ontario children's centre is accusing the Conservative Government of arranging a patronage appointment for an out-of-work Tory.

Lucille Desjardins, of the Muskoka Family Focus and Children's Place, said Tuesday the manager of a branch of the Social Services Ministry asked a hiring committee she sits on to intervene on behalf of a woman who was once employed by a cabinet minister.

The New Democratic Party says the situation is just the tip of the iceberg and that many more examples of "partisan patronage" exist.

"The Conservatives are seizing control of grassroots hiring and funding decisions while using children and community volunteers like yo-yos," said Shelley Martel, children's critic for the NDP.

"It's all about rewarding the friends of government."

But Premier Mike Harris said he was unaware of any patronage appointments in the Muskoka-Parry Sound riding, where the Conservatives recently won a byelection.

"Our goal is to constantly try and have the best people in these positions," he said.

Martel said the province has in at least two other cases recently recommended the hiring of Tory supporters for jobs within the social services sector, even after qualified local candidates had already been selected. She cited as examples health units funded by the ministry in Sudbury, Ont. and the riding of Muskoka-Parry Sound.

"This type of pressure is unacceptable," said Mary-Anne Bedard, of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Shortly after the Tories introduced the \$30-million Early Years Challenge Fund to pay for children's services, the province's 37 health units were asked to form steering committees with the mandate to hire local co-ordinators.

"These committees were supposed to come from the community. (People) who the community thought could best advocate and put forward their interests, not who the ministry felt they could control," said Bedard.

Several months later the government changed the process making all steering committee members government appointees.

There are about 380 positions to be filled across the province, including 37 co-ordinators, on 12-month contracts to handle \$30 million in grants. The employee, who is paid between \$45,000 and \$65,000, reports to John Baird, the social services minister.

Desjardins said she received a phone call in February from a ministry employee asking her selection committee to interview someone for the position. She said the group had already chosen a candidate after a lengthy search process.

She said after interviewing a former assistant to former finance minister Ernie Eves, the committee decided the woman did not have the "educational qualifications or the experience required for the position."

The committee was nonetheless told to forward the woman's name as a recommended candidate, said Desjardins.

"I am left with the distinct feeling that this process has nothing to do with ensuring that the children receive the best services . . . but rather it was a job creation exercise for political patronage," she wrote in letter made public Tuesday.

A ministry spokesman could provide no real answer as to what happened in Muskoka-Parry Sound.

"I can't say that something special was done for this person," said Dan Miles. "The appointments for the area haven't even been made yet."

He added that all three provincial parties have put forth recommendations for appointments.

-Reprinted from The Toronto Star

Region: Ontario^[2]

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