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Mar took foreign trip after getting D.C. job

Second retiring Tory also along on German visit aimed at improving MLAs' skills

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EDMONTON - Last Thursday, Gary Mar learned he'll become Alberta's new agent in Washington and must resign as a Tory MLA by late October.

Three days later, he jetted to Germany on a publicly funded trip to learn how to become a better legislator.

The Canadian Taxpayers Federation's provincial director laughed when he was told.

"That's ridiculous," Scott Hennig said. "There's no justification to send an MLA with one foot out the door on a junket to learn how to be a better parliamentarian when he's only got maybe 30 days left of being a parliamentarian."

Mar said Thursday that Speaker Ken Kowalski assigned him as one of three MLAs to the German conference several weeks ago, when he was vying for the Washington job but didn't know it was officially his.

While the professional development he may have received only applies to the few weeks remaining in Mar's 14-year career as an MLA, the former health minister insisted it was a worthwhile trip.

"The opportunity to meet legislators from other jurisdictions remains important whether or not I am an MLA or whether I serve the people of Alberta in another capacity," he said in an interview.

Fighting a cold, Mar flew back to Alberta on Wednesday after only three days at the Partnership of Parliamentarians conference in Darmstadt, a central German city. Mar said two nights in a hotel cost roughly \$300 Cdn, while local government covered travel, food and conference costs there. The Speaker's office could not immediately provide flight costs or a budget for the whole trip.

The conference runs until Oct. 12, and fellow Tory MLAs Len Webber and Richard Magnus are staying on.

Magnus's days as a parliamentarian are also numbered: The 14-year Calgary backbencher announced last month he will retire when the next provincial election is called.

Magnus and Mar were confirmed for the trip long before the Speaker's office knew they were leaving politics, said Bev Alenius, an aide to Kowalski.

Kowalski asked all parties' MLAs in a letter this spring whether they wanted to attend the conference alongside other Canadian provincial, U.S. and German politicians.

He selected the three from a shortlist of a few MLAs who wanted to go, Alenius said.

"We didn't know Richard Magnus wasn't going to run in March. And we certainly didn't know that Gary Mar was going to Washington in March," she said. "Certainly, when Mr. Magnus indicated he'd like to go, (the) Speaker said, 'Fine.' "

Alenius noted that Kowalski tries to offer such educational travel to all MLAs who want to go, and Magnus had never been. Each member will have to report back what they learned for the 2007 Legislative Assembly annual report, she said.

When cabinet ministers or government MLAs go on international business for any ministry, communications staff send out news releases disclosing who is going, why, when, where, and how much it's estimated to cost taxpayers. (For instance, they recently announced that Employment Minister Iris Evans and an aide leave Saturday for 14 days in China, Japan and the Philippines to discuss investment and labour issues, at an estimated cost of \$45,000.)

No such detailed notices or itineraries go out for parliamentarians' trips organized by the Speaker's office. Hennig expressed surprise that in today's age of increased government disclosure, not much information is released ahead of these MLA trips.

Liberal house leader Laurie Blakeman said her opposition caucus mainly refuses out-of-province MLA trips, although one rookie member attended a conference on ethics laws in Victoria, B.C., last month.

"I'm sorry, why did we send Gary Mar to Germany when he likely knew ... he had applied for a job in Washington that wasn't parliamentary at all?" Blakeman asked.

Mar will be paid more than \$200,000 a year as Alberta's official representative in Washington, replacing former energy minister Murray Smith. The NDP used slices of bacon as props last week while accusing Premier Ed Stelmach of pork-barrel patronage.

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