

Membership has its privileges

Patronage system rolls on, despite political embarrassments

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EDMONTON - Remember Ken Kowalski's 1994 appointment to chair the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board? It stirred up so much oilpatch opposition that then premier Ralph Klein had to rescind the post he gave the former deputy premier who'd been freshly bounced from cabinet.

Governments in Alberta and elsewhere have traditionally rewarded loyal supporters with plum appointments, often over the hue and cry of opposition parties and the general public.

The Kowalski appointment enraged a sector with considerably more clout: Big Oil. When it said the position required somebody more qualified and less political, Klein was forced to respond.

All eyes will be on the Progressive Conservative government again this fall when it appoints a new EUB chair to replace longtime civil servant Neil McCrank, who stepped down last spring.

History has shown that governments do not always learn from such mistakes.

Klein's predecessor, Don Getty, used the patronage system to compensate the Stettler MLA who resigned in 1989, clearing the way for Getty to run in a byelection after he lost his own Edmonton seat. Brian Downey, the Castor-area farmer, soon landed jobs with the Alberta Hail and Crop Insurance Corp and the Alberta Grain Commission.

The government didn't announce those appointments. But the NDP did.

There have been other embarrassing moments for the Conservatives.

In 1996, a former Tory MLA who championed the province's first human rights legislation called for the replacement of the province's entire Human Rights Commission, including the chair and four commissioners with connections to



CREDIT: Brian Gavriloff, The Journal, File PC membership cards like this one, while rare among the general population, are common among members of the province's boards.

the Conservative party.

Ron Ghitter, at that point a senator, urged the province to appoint more credible candidates. His concerns were echoed by Jack O'Neill, a former chief commissioner, who warned that "the government has too much control over the commission."

In 2002, the firing of the Palliser Health Region's medical officer of health drew more accusations of political interference. Dr. David Swann's offence was speaking out against the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. He was ousted by Len Mitzel -- then board chair and Tory constituency president for then environment minister Lorne Taylor, who strongly opposed Kyoto.

Taylor and Mitzel admitted to a phone conversation days before the firing, but both said they only discussed the board's climate-change stance, and not Swann.

Today, Mitzel is a Tory MLA.

Swann sits on the Liberal benches.

The membership of health authorities rarely escapes controversy, given that those appointees control budgets worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

In 2001, the Klein government named three of its former ministers as authority chairmen.

The debate grew even more heated in 2003 when the Tories nixed health-board elections, less than two years after first letting Albertans choose some of the members.

Klein reasoned that ordinary Albertans really didn't care who ran the boards, they just wanted to know the health-care system was reliable.

But being appointed doesn't mean you're not expendable.

Nine card-carrying Tories sat on the East Central Health board that was fired this summer after a probe into the

Vegreville hospital contamination scare found that the region's 12 health facilities had sterilization or safety problems.

The investigation by the Health Quality Council suggested that the province's Health Facilities Review Committee might not be suited to perform quality reviews, after writing "such a positive report" on the problem-plagued Vegreville hospital in 2004.

The Health Facilities Review Committee is two-thirds Tory, and chaired by an MLA.

While many well-connected board appointees say politics have nothing to do with their posts, some have been unabashed about the link.

"Does the sun come up in the morning?" businessman and former Tory vice-president Brian Heidecker once quipped to The Journal. He has served on the Alberta Securities Commission, as an ATB Financial director, and currently

chairs the University of Alberta board of governors.

"I think I'm doing a good job of putting forward the view, the spirit and the philosophy of the government of the day," Heidecker said in 1992.

"I think that is very important. If the government changes, I shouldn't be there."

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PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE PARTY CONNECTIONS

- Alberta Foundation for the Arts directors include two Tory MLAs who left last election, as well as Kristina Kowalski, who married Speaker Ken Kowalski in 2005 after serving on the executive of his PC riding association. Six of the 11 directors are Tory party members.

- All six appointed members on the Alberta Order of Excellence Council are Tories. The council considers nominees for Alberta's highest honour for citizens. Among the council members is Walter Paszkowski, a former agriculture minister.

- Since her 2004 election defeat in St. Albert, former Tory MLA Mary O'Neill has been named to the Alberta Cancer Board and NAIT board.

- Joanne Taylor of the Law Enforcement Review Board is the spouse of Calgary Health CEO Jack Davis, a longtime Ralph Klein adviser. Her stepson is Peter Davis, who was top aide to former solicitor general Harvey Cenaiko when he made Taylor's appointment in 2005.

- Karen Bartsch was named to the University of Lethbridge board in 2004 by then learning minister Lyle Oberg. Two years later, she became president of his Strathmore-Brooks Conservative association.

- No card-carrying Tories sit on the Alberta College of Art and Design board.

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