

Ministers, ex-ministers do the shuffle
You'll know the Stelmach backers by the size of their offices

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The staff in the Speaker's office at the legislature have stuck a handmade sign outside their door, tacked it up like an amulet to ward off evil spirits.

"Congratulations Premier Ed Stelmach," it says.

No doubt Speaker Ken Kowalski is sincere in his congratulations. However, given that Kowalski supported Jim Dinning in the leadership race, you have to wonder if the sign outside Kowalski's prime-location, third-floor office is also something of a peace offering to Stelmach -- something to ward off the army of furniture movers who have invaded the legislature this week and are busily turfing out demoted ministers and their belongings.

Not that Kowalski should worry. Being Speaker, he technically is the master of the legislative assembly and its "environs" and therefore is immune from the vagaries of partisan politics.

In other words, he can't be tossed from his office by the premier.

Everyone else can.

Consequently, the hallways are clogged with the detritus of

careers turned upside down: desks and chairs and glum politicians who backed the wrong premiership horse and who suddenly find themselves backbenchers with too much furniture for their new postage-stamp offices in the Annex.

But if one man's hell is another man's heaven, there are plenty of happy faces in the legislature as newly promoted politicians move into recently vacated ministerial offices.

Near as I can tell, only Guy Boutilier, the former environment minister who is now the new intergovernmental relations minister, is staying in his old office.

All the others are moving. Even those with no need to move, such as Ron Stevens. He is keeping his portfolio as justice minister, but he is not keeping his office. Stevens is being moved from his spacious office on the second floor to former aboriginal affairs minister Pearl Calahasen's old office on the fourth floor. It is small and cramped, and for Stevens it must be like trading in an SUV for a Chevette.

Why is Stevens being moved?

When I asked around, I was met with incredulous looks. "Isn't it obvious?" said one building staffer.

"Well, no," I said, sounding more obtuse than usual. Stevens is staying on as justice minister; why wouldn't he keep his office?

"He supported Jim Dinning," came the slightly exasperated response. This, according to the political gossip, is Stevens' punishment for not supporting Stelmach. He gets to stay in cabinet, but he's demoted to a smaller office.

Promoted to Stevens' old roomy office is one of Stelmach's most loyal supporters, Iris Evans, who moves upstairs from her cramped first-floor office.

It's all a bit petty and more than a bit laughable. It's also a bit surprising given that I've never thought of Stelmach as vindictive or petty. I'm pretty sure Stelmach had no hand in choosing which ministers get which office.

But it doesn't really matter. This is politics. In order for Stelmach to reward his supporters he has to, even inadvertently, punish

those who didn't support him.

That helps explain why he appointed a new cabinet that is more male, more white and more rural than the province it is supposed to represent. That's because the province didn't choose Stelmach as premier, Conservative party members did - and many of Stelmach's supporters came from outside the big cities.

It is a cabinet that has three members from Calgary and one from Edmonton.

The same kind of off-kilter balance can be seen in several of the government's most important behind-the-scenes committees. The Agenda and Priorities Committee, for example, has one member from Edmonton (Health Minister Dave Hancock) but none from Calgary.

The Treasury Board has three members from Calgary but none from Edmonton.

Why is there so little representation from Alberta's major cities?

That's the question that keeps popping up among Conservative party members and MLAs. The Stelmach government isn't doing much to provide answers.

Usually these kinds of questions are answered by official spokespeople. Stelmach doesn't have any. He still has not named a press secretary -- a key position that would provide answers, quash rumours and fill the ever-increasing information vacuum that speculating columnists and pundits love to play in.

Instead, the premier's communications office is being held together in the interim by Ralph Klein's former press secretary, Marisa Etmanski, who is there mainly to turn on the lights and give frustrated reporters someone to roll their eyes at.

She is the nicest press secretary in the country but she is Klein's press secretary, not Stelmach's, and is staying in the office not because she wants to but as a personal favour to Stelmach. Call it ironic, call it goofy. Call it politics as usual: the only person in the legislature who wants to move out, can't.

By the way, thanks to all who have entered my contest: "How

Can We Improve Democracy in Alberta?"

A reminder that the deadline for entries is Wednesday.

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Off the Ledge

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