



Wednesday » February
13 » 2008

Returning officer contributed to Stelmach campaign

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EDMONTON - The government-appointed returning officer in Ed Stelmach's home riding gave the premier's 2006 leadership campaign as much as \$1,000, according to the premier's financial disclosure documents.

Ralph Soldan, returning officer in Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, is one of several election officials with strong Tory ties. Opposition leaders blasted the government Monday for using the posts to hand out patronage favours.

"How can you expect a fair outcome in an election -- what could be a very close election -- when the referee is actually part of one side?" Liberal Leader Kevin Taft said at his party's Edmonton headquarters.

Returning officers are in charge of preparing voter lists, counting ballots and deciding where polling stations should be located. They are prohibited from partisan activities once they are named to the posts, but the Elections Act puts no restrictions on their activities before or after their terms.

Calgary-Currie returning officer Robin Darsi ran for the PC nomination in that riding less than three months ago. He lost to Arthur Kent and was named to his new post on Jan. 23.

Darsi couldn't remember how long he has been a Tory, but said he sees nothing wrong with the arrangement.

"Once I was appointed, I severed all ties with the Conservatives," he said Monday. "I recognize that I am non-partisan and I won't and haven't engaged in any political activity for a party or a candidate."

Soldan said he couldn't remember whether he gave the premier a leadership donation, which is listed in Stelmach's documents as between \$500 and \$1,000. But the donation is listed under his name from Vegreville Implements Inc., which Soldan said he partly owns.

Soldan denied any partisan ties. "We're here to help all candidates."

Stelmach said he doesn't see a need to change the system and insisted there is no need to have an independent third party appoint returning officers.

"Their duty is to be fair to all," Stelmach said, adding he hasn't heard of any instance where a returning officer has done anything improper.

In 2006 Lorne Gibson, the province's chief electoral officer recommended to the legislature that his office have control over appointments of returning officers.

"Their independence in both fact and perception helps to assure the public of the integrity of election administration within the province," he wrote.

PC connections abound on the returning officer list. In Edmonton-Meadowlark, the officer is Allie Wojtaszek, a PC party member whose husband is the president of the local riding association. Wojtaszek supported Dave Hancock in the PC leadership race and has kept a partisan blog that has now become inaccessible to the public. **In Calgary-North Hill, officer Andrea Grubbe is the secretary of the PC riding association.**

Don Severs, the officer in Calgary-North West, was former Energy Minister Greg Melchin's campaign manager in 1997 and 2001 and was his financial officer in 2004.

Twenty-four other returning officers also held PC memberships between 2002 and 2006, according to a party list obtained by The Journal.

-- With files from Jason Markusoff, Darcy Henton, Edmonton Journal and Renata D'Aliesio, Calgary Herald

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