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Salary sparks criticism of Tory insider's posting

Province defends Washington envoy post for Mar

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The provincial government revealed Wednesday that former cabinet minister Gary Mar will be paid an annual salary of \$230,520 as Alberta's new emissary in Washington, sparking a fresh round of criticism.

Mar, a lawyer who has spent 14 years in the political arena, will also be given a car or taxable car allowance, a condo where Hillary Clinton's mother is a neighbour and an office at the Canadian Embassy on famous Pennsylvania Avenue.

Liberal Leader Kevin Taft said he doesn't have a problem with Alberta having an envoy in the U.S. capital, but he chastised the government for again hiring someone from within Tory ranks.

The last person to hold the sought-after job on a regular basis was former energy minister Murray Smith.

"It's patronage and it is, I think, regrettable that the government finds it necessary to appoint former cabinet ministers who aren't running again to these kinds of positions," Taft said.

But International Relations Minister Guy Boutilier maintained Mar is a natural choice for the job, "having served in numerous ministries, having sat at the cabinet table for more than a decade."

A key challenge for Mar will be to deal with the shifting political landscape in the U.S., with a presidential election to be held next year, Boutilier added.

Mar's hiring also got the backing of former premier Ralph Klein, who said the pressing issues for the province have changed since he appointed Smith as envoy about three years ago.

Smith was sent to promote Alberta as a secure energy supplier to the U.S. and to "throw some water buckets" on the mad cow disease scare, but those concerns have been dealt with, Klein said.

"Now the issues are E. coli in Canadian beef," he said. "There are a number of issues Gary will have to deal with, mostly concerning beef, some with lumber."

Mar was returning to Alberta from Washington and could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Since Mar was first elected to the legislature in 1993, he has served as minister for health, community development, education and the environment. But he was left out of Premier Ed Stelmach's cabinet.

Mar's base salary for his new job will be \$230,520 -- but he'll also be paid relocation costs and related expenses, and an international assignment premium. Smith earned a base salary of \$210,552 in 2006-07, with total benefits (cash and non-cash) totalling an additional \$84,000.

Scott Hennig, Alberta director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, called for the government to provide more information on what the publicly funded office is accomplishing, such as a detailed annual report.

Hennig estimated Mar will also be due a transition allowance of approximately \$455,000.

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