



By **JEREMY LOOME**, Legislature Bureau

Premier Ed Stelmach says he won't look into opposition concerns that loyal Tories have been named to supposedly neutral returning officer positions.

It came after the Alberta Liberals noted that four returning officers appointed by the government have extremely strong Tory connections – including one officer who has openly criticized the Liberal candidate in her riding on a blog.

“So you're saying that off the 83 there's nobody there that has relatives in another party?” Stelmach said when told that the Liberals want officers appointed by a neutral third party.

Among those concerning the opposition are Robin Darsi, the returning officer in the anticipated tight Calgary Currie race between radio veteran Dave Taylor, who is the Liberal incumbent, and Arthur Kent, the former TV reporter. Kent ran and beat Darsi for the Tory nod.

In Calgary North Hill, Tory riding executive member **Andrea Grubbe** was given the role; in Calgary Montrose, it was handed to Lynn Warkentin, who is the wife of the PC riding association's treasurer, Frank Warkentin.

And in Edmonton Meadowlark, Allie Wojtaszek has received the role, even though she is the wife of the PC riding association president.

Three of the four were not among the initial list of 63 returning officers appointed by the province in December, but were instead added to the roster by the Tories through an order in council earlier this year.

Alberta Liberal Leader Kevin Taft said he can't understand why the Tories wouldn't favour neutral appointments and why the appointments weren't made back in December, with the rest.

“These are people that should be absolutely neutral and should be seen to be neutral and when they're close chums or spouses, or plugged right into the Tory election machine, they're not. And nobody's going to respect the premier.”

Although she has since removed it, Wojtaszek posted a scathing blog entry about Liberal candidate Debbie Cavaliere when she received the Liberal nomination Nov. 23. In her post, she said Cavaliere only switched parties when it was clear she couldn't win the PC nod.

Wojtaszek also took a shot at departing MLA Maurice Tougas, saying he'd “decided that he'd rather be back ‘writing his gossip column’ at the Edmonton Examiner.” In fact, Tougas is the paper's former editor.

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