

Tories stack Alberta boards

The Edmonton Journal

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Journal reporters Darcy Henton and Jason Markusoff analyzed the membership of 100 Alberta agencies, boards and commissions -- known as Alberta's ABCs -- and discovered a disproportionately large number of card-carrying, high-profile Tories.

- Today: When it comes to Alberta's boards and agencies, is there such a thing as too many Tories?

- Monday: Reviewing an appointment process that allows for too much patronage

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Something unites the 13 appointed board members of the Peace Country Health Region -- and it's not just a stated commitment to fiscal responsibility and improving health care in Alberta's northwest.

They're all card-carrying members of the Progressive Conservative Association of Alberta.

With former Tory cabinet minister Marv Moore at the helm and another former MLA sitting on that all-PC board, the region stands out in an Edmonton Journal investigation of high-ranking Tories and government cronies serving on provincial boards. But scores of others are just as stacked.

The Conservatives have drawn criticism in the past over blatant patronage appointments, but The Journal probe, which analyzed the composition of 100 government agencies, boards and commissions, reveals just how far the party's influence reaches into the everyday lives of Albertans.

It shows that the province's most influential boards are loaded with Tories -- constituency executives, former candidates or key members of the party's powerful provincial executive.

Even the current president of the Tory party, Margaret Mrazek, chairs a government-appointed board -- the Alberta Fatality Review Board.



CREDIT: Larry Wong/Edmonton Journal
Marv Moore, a former PC cabinet minister and campaign chief, now chairs the 13-member board of the Peace Country Health Region, which is entirely made up of card-carrying Tories.

"That's called politics," says Alf Savage, a former party president who chairs the Auto Insurance Rate Board and serves on the Municipal Government Board. "In many cases you want the people you know -- and they're the people you know."

Keith Brownsey, who teaches political science at Calgary's Mount Royal College, is not impressed.

"The party has become the province, and it's a real slap in the face of democracy. It demonstrates that if people want to be appointed to these boards they have to become a card-carrying Conservative," he says. "We hope the government has appointed people of competence, but you have to question that when some of these boards are so overwhelmingly stacked with partisan individuals."

Premier Ed Stelmach's cabinet appointed Mrazek to the three-member Fatality Review Board in April as she was campaigning for the party presidency, which she won two weeks later.

She bristled when asked if she thought there might be a conflict of interest in serving on the board while being party president.

"They're totally different," Mrazek said. "I sit there as a member of the fatality review committee reviewing cases that are presented to us, as a lawyer. It has nothing to do with the PC party."

"I'm concerned that that's even being raised. I find that very offensive."

Moore didn't realize that every single member of his Peace Country Health Region board was a member of the same political party. But he says his government affiliation hasn't stopped him from standing up for the health concerns of northern Albertans.

He just does it respectfully.

"You don't do your health authority any good by bad-mouthing somebody in government," he says. "I state the facts about funding and our position, but I certainly don't go out of the way to criticize individuals. I'm a member of the Progressive Conservative Party, but I would do the same if it was some other government."

In Peace Country, the revelation of the health board's make-up is unsettling to some residents, unremarkable to others. After all, Alberta has been under Tory rule for the last 36 years.

But that doesn't mean they all like it.

Retired Peace River social worker Joan Wahl isn't critical of the individuals who serve, but she is dismayed they represent only one political ideology.

"I think the people on these boards have the best interests of the people they serve at heart," the 68-year-old says.

"The only problem is you don't have people with differing perspectives. I know I see things very differently from a very right-wing Conservative."

The Journal compared the "public" board membership lists against the names of Tory aides, organizers, politicians and candidates. It also matched those board members against the 60,000 names on PC party lists for 2002 to September 2006 -- a list that predates last fall's leadership campaign, when the party swelled with instant members of all political stripes.

The results?

Of the 100 boards, 44 -- including all nine health regions, some post-secondary schools and ATB Financial -- were at least half comprised of PC-connected directors, with 448 of the 983 board positions held by PC members. Another 15 were held by senior government officials.

That means while PC members made up about three per cent of Alberta's electorate of approximately two million people, they held 46 per cent -- nearly half -- of the board posts.

The names of current Alberta Liberal executives did not appear on any of the boards examined by The Journal.

'Threat to democracy'

Earlier this year, Stelmach announced a review of ABCs -- agencies, boards and commissions. A three-member panel, chaired by former Energy and Utilities Board chair Neil McCrank, is expected to report in October.

The premier says he will wait for the report to decide what changes might be required, but he is not alarmed by the number of Tory members on key provincial boards.

"If we were to rule out all Conservative affiliation -- anybody who might have a Progressive Conservative membership -- we would rule out an awful lot of people who have the skill sets to sit on boards and agencies," Stelmach said in an interview.

The boards include groups tasked to oversee massive taxpayer-funded budgets -- including some in excess of \$2.5 billion -- and set policies that affect thousands of civil servants and dozens of public programs. They deal with everything from workers' compensation and liquor-licence inspections to cancer-treatment initiatives and living allowances for Albertans with developmental disabilities.

Although some positions come with no compensation, they include generous expense accounts. Some provide remuneration of up to \$500 a day for attendance at meetings.

And even without pay, board posts afford members considerable public influence, and invariably appear on their curriculum vitae.

The partisan board members, and the politicians who selected them, argue that appointments are based on merit rather than favours, and that political involvement shouldn't necessarily exclude qualified people.

But many people affected by board decisions worry how much sway these unelected public representatives have.

A spokesman for Friends of Medicare expressed alarm that the boards of every health region in the province -- boards that at one time were partially elected -- are so Tory top-heavy.

The group, which opposed the Klein government's push toward privatized health care, wants Alberta's auditor-general to investigate the impact patronage appointments may have upon the delivery of health services.

"We certainly think it should be probed," says Jack Goldberg, the group's chair. "We've always favoured elected boards and we've been vehemently opposed to the decision to stop the elections."

Auditor General Fred Dunn noted in his 2004-05 annual report that many boards "deliver significant services to, or protect, Albertans." But critics say the number of Tories on the public bodies raises questions about which master they serve: the government or the people.

Bruce Uditsky, CEO of the Alberta Association for Community Living, said the provincial boards for persons with developmental disabilities once included families of disabled Albertans, but many are now heavily dominated by appointed Tories.

"We know these boards are really responsible to government," he says. "We don't have any illusions that they are somehow really responsible to the community."

Liberal Leader Kevin Taft calls the depth of patronage on provincial bodies "a genuine threat to democracy."

"I think this should alarm every citizen in this province. The government and all of these organizations should not be run as a private club. These boards, first and foremost, should be made up of the most qualified people -- not the most politically connected."

Taft says it means that when a Tory-dominated board makes a poor decision, it is more likely to be covered up than aired publicly. "I think the public realizes it's time to drain this swamp."

Alliance Leader Paul Hinman says the Tories seem to abhor dissent on its boards, but says dissent is a necessary ingredient to good government.

"Dissenters make good organizations better and they bring down poor organizations quicker," he said.

Occasionally, the ruling Conservatives nominate retired opposition members for agency work. Former Liberal leader Ken Nicol was named last year to the board of the \$100-million Rural Alberta's Development Fund, while former NDP head Pam Barrett served briefly on the Alberta Foundation for the Arts board in 2001.

Barrett said the board, which allocates cultural grants, never seemed overly sympathetic to the government line when she served on it -- but she was alarmed to learn that it is now chaired by the 2007 Tory convention organizer and that six of the 10 members are Tories, including two past government MLAs.

"It sounds to me like it's become a political machine, not like an arts support machine," Barrett said.

Selection process slammed

The Journal found that boards with a more formalized recruiting process have relatively few Tory card holders on them. Alberta's 10 Child and Family Services Authorities, which regulate day-care centres and handle foster placements and adoptions, have a rigorous, months-long board recruitment process.

The Alberta government also has a system in place that is supposed to ensure a fair process for recruitment to most of its other boards.

A directive introduced by former premier Ralph Klein in 1993 called on ministers to set up independent review panels to interview and vet candidates for each vacancy on dozens of top boards and prepare a short list for a minister's final decision. The process was tweaked further last year, at the urging of the auditor general.

But the recruitment directive is still only a guideline, and it's up to a cabinet minister's discretion whether to follow the process, says government spokesman Trevor Colombe.

As for those short lists drawn up by an ad-hoc review panel? "The minister can decide to not accept the recommendations and go his or her own way," Colombe says.

The auditor general says that's not good enough. "We would prefer to see the guidelines as being more than discretionary," Dunn says. "We'd like to see the guidelines viewed as leading practices that should be followed."

The process was far less formal last September when former government services minister George VanderBurg asked his riding PC association president, Dale Johnson, to consider serving on the board of Credit Counselling Services of Alberta, an agency that advises Albertans on debt problems and financial decisions.

Johnson submitted his resume, ministry staff were suitably impressed with his farming and small-business background and VanderBurg authorized the appointment through March 2009.

"I asked him to help us out -- it wasn't a very sought-after board position," says VanderBurg, now a backbench MLA for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne. The three-year position comes with no compensation, involves few meetings and drew little interest.

"If he's got the experience and the knowledge to sit on the board, why should he be excluded?"

NDP leader Brian Mason says there's a reason why patronage appointments continue in the face of recommendations from the provincial auditor general to improve practices.

"The Alberta Tory patronage system is designed to keep the Conservatives in power -- not to provide good services to the people of Alberta."

Retired Taber-area farmer and Tory party member Roy Reti, who sits on the Chinook Health Region board, says he's not bound to follow party lines when it's time to vote on health issues in the region.

If it came down to supporting the government or supporting the people in his health region, he says his loyalties lie with the people.

"I have never been one to favour anything the PCs have done simply because I am a member of the party or because I bought a membership," he said.

"It never affected the way I would look at an issue on the board.

"You attend the PC dinners and the PC golf tournaments so you get heard, so the MLAs know who you are and what you represent."

Carmen Ewing had no idea that she was the only director on the 10-member Northern Alberta Development Council that hasn't bought a Tory membership -- and she's not entirely comfortable with it.

"I would prefer to see a variety of political stripes sitting around a table because I think you can't all be able to say yes," said Ewing, mayor of the northwestern Alberta village of Girouxville.

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NO TICKET TO PROSPERITY

Working on an Alberta agency, board or commission may have its privileges, but it isn't a ticket to prosperity. Some appointments provide an honorarium while others pay expenses. For health authorities, it's between \$134 and \$350 per day for members, based on hours worked, and up to \$492 daily for chairs. On the Peace Country Health board, Moore earned \$42,000 in 2005-06, while most others members earned around \$15,000, including additional allowances and benefits. At Capital Health, chair Neil Wilkinson -- an admitted fan of former premier Ralph Klein, under whom he was first selected -- earned \$79,000 for 2005-06, the last year for which figures are available.

SOURCE: Alberta Government

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A TORY TOP 40

The Journal has examined 100 Alberta agencies, boards and commissions and compared the names of the people appointed to serve on the boards to a recent membership list of the Alberta Progressive Conservative Association.

Here are the top 40 boards with the highest percentages of card-carrying Conservatives serving on them.

Health boards and regions

- Peace Country Health Region:

13 Tories / 13-member board

- East Central Health:

9 Tories / 12-member board

- Capital Health:

8 Tories / 14-member board

- Calgary Health:

7 Tories / 13-member board

- Aspen Health Region:

11 Tories / 14-member board

- David Thompson Health:

11 Tories / 15-member board

- Chinook Health:

7 Tories / 12-member board

- Northern Lights Health:

7 Tories / 12-member board

- Palliser Health Region:

7 Tories / 13-member board

- Alberta Cancer Board:

5 Tories / 10-member board

- Health Quality Council:

4 Tories / 8-member board

- Public Health Appeal Board:

2 Tories / 4-member board

- Health Facilities Review Board:

8 Tories / 12-member board

Post-secondary Institutions

- Northern Alberta Institute of Technology:

8 Tories / 12-member board

- Portage College:

5 Tories / 7-member board

- Lethbridge College:

4 Tories / 7-member board

- Athabasca University:

6 Tories / 11-member board

- Red Deer College:

3 Tories / 6-member board

- Mount Royal College:

5 Tories / 10-member board

financial

- ATB Financial:

9 Tories / 13-member board

- Credit Union Deposit Guarantee Corp.:

4 Tories / 8-member board

addictions and disabilities

- Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities:

5 Tories / 8-member board

- Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission:

7 Tories / 10-member board

- Crystal Meth Task Force:

7 Tories / 12-member board

- Northwest Alberta Persons with Developmental Disabilities:

6 Tories / 7-member board

Agriculture

- Alberta Grain Commission:

8 Tories / 11-member board

- Agriculture Products Marketing Council:

7 Tories / 11-member board

- Alberta Agriculture Research Institute:

4 Tories / 7-member board

Other

- Seniors Advisory Council:

8 Tories / 10-member board

- Northern Alberta Development Council:

9 Tories / 10-member board

- Worker's Compensation Board:

3 Tories / 4-member board

- Alberta Foundation of the Arts:

6 Tories / 10-member board

- Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission:

6 Tories / 7-member board

- Alberta Economic Development Authority:

29 Tories / 60-member board

- Alberta Order of Excellence Council:

6 Tories / 6-member board

- Social Care Facilities Review Commission:

7 Tories / 11-member board

- Alberta Science and Research Authority:

9 Tories / 19-member board

- Northeast PDD Board:

5 Tories / 7-member board

- Alberta Fatality Review Board:

3 Tories / 3-member board

- Rural Alberta's Development Fund:

6 Tories / 12-member board

WHO'S TORY NOW?

SEE THE LIST: Find out how many PC party members sit on the 100 Alberta government agencies, boards and commissions scrutinized by The Journal. Go to Online Extras at edmontonjournal.com

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Loosen ties to Tories, Alta. board members urge

Darcy Henton and Jason Markusoff

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EDMONTON - Albertans serving on public boards have served notice that they want to cut some of the ties that bind them to the provincial government.

They've told a panel reviewing the province's 300 agencies, boards and commissions that it's "poor policy" to appoint MLAs and senior government officials to sit on public bodies.

They've also said that "purely political appointments should be discouraged."

"Participants repeatedly said that merit and competency-based appointments are essential to good governance," the three-member panel reports in an 11-page document recapping consultation sessions that examined the independence and accountability of Alberta's boards.

Ron Crossley, who heads the Central Alberta Community Board for Persons with Developmental Disabilities, says there are no MLAs or government officials on his board.

He doesn't want them.

"I think it reduces the effectiveness and the purpose of the board, if in fact it has elected people on it, and the objectivity of the board may be in fact reduced because of political implications," said Crossley, a management consultant and part-time instructor at Red Deer College.

An Edmonton Journal investigation that looked at 100 of the province's "significant" boards, agencies and commissions revealed Sunday that many of Alberta's key boards are stacked with members of the Progressive Conservative party. Three of the 100 were wholly made up of card-carrying Tories.

The Journal's analysis showed top PC party executives, former MLAs and former nomination candidates serve on -- and chair -- many of the top boards, including most regional health authorities and college and university boards.

Panel chair Neil McCrank, a former Alberta deputy minister and former chairman of the Energy and Utilities Board, declined to comment on the concerns raised during the review of agencies, boards and commissions, known in government circles as ABCs.

He said the panel will address the issues in a report expected to be presented

to Premier Ed Stelmach in October.

"There are options, obviously, as to how to deal with these issues," he said. "Every jurisdiction has experienced similar issues. We'll make a recommendation how to deal with it in Alberta as well."

Stelmach said in an interview that he is interested in what the report will say about MLAs sitting on committees.

MLAs sit on 47 ABCs, and serve as chair or co-chair on 31 of them.

Former Social Credit leader Bob Clark, who co-chairs Alberta's Rural Development Fund, said putting MLAs on boards is not something his government did when the SoCredits were in power.

"I think it's good for them to be ex-officio members, but they shouldn't be formal members."

He said placing MLAs on committees creates a problem of public perception. "It's better to have people who are unattached from a political standpoint."

Jack Perraton, who heads the University of Calgary's board of governors, says it's crucial that boards are independent.

"You can't have an institution that's run solely by individuals who feel they have a duty of obligation to an entity outside the institution."

No MLAs, government officials or ex-MLAs sit on his board.

Perraton says it works closely with the province to choose new appointees to ensure they have skills that the board requires.

"Independence is important and it's important to have people who know and understand that the institution functions as well as it can and in the best interests of all of its stakeholders," he said.

Liberal MLA Hugh MacDonald said MLAs are busy enough with legislature committee work and shouldn't be sitting on outside, arm's-length boards.

"If these agencies, boards and commissions are going to have independence, they don't need MLAs to be sitting as babysitters or political minders on these committees," he said.

"They should be looking after the public interest, and not the political interests of the governing party."

NDP Leader Brian Mason called on the Stelmach government to de-politicize the process. He wants an independent commission that advertises available positions, screens and interviews candidates and recommends appointments based on merit.

Current guidelines suggest -- but don't mandate -- that the province advertise board vacancies that can be filled by members of the general public. Some board positions are reserved for industry representatives.

Mason also called for the end of MLA appointments to the boards.

"They appoint backbenchers to these committees -- not because they're necessarily the right person, but because they need to keep their backbenchers busy and happy and well-paid," he said.

Faron Ellis, who teaches political science at Lethbridge College, said governments that fill their boards with cronies could find themselves on the hook if a board can't do the job.

"If you find extreme incompetence on a board and it is stacked, then you have a political problem," he said.

A discussion paper presented by the panel suggests the work of ABCs "has a profound effect on the lives of Albertans" and "to perform their activities effectively, ABCs require some independence from government.

"However, they remain government organizations that must be accountable, effective and subject to legitimate government policy direction," it notes.

It states that boards must meet "conflicting expectations of government, the end user and public opinion," but "their bottom line is the public good."

Vern Hartwell, a former Strathcona county mayor who won his job as chair of the Natural Resources Conservation Board through a competition, said government doesn't influence his quasi-judicial board, but he doesn't think the fact that some boards are chaired by MLAs or made up of members of the Tory party is necessarily bad.

"They may carry any (party's) card, but if you get down deep you will find compassion and humanity are the main things in their lives."

Some board members who aren't Tories say there can be a benefit to having MLAs sitting on government boards.

Carmen Ewing, who serves on the Northern Alberta Development Council, says having an MLA chair is vital to her board.

"If we didn't have an MLA as chair, our input into provincial issues that regard the north particularly would not be the same," she said. "I think you have to have that contact, that direct link."

While some Tories may be appointed to serve on boards as a reward for their party work and loyalty, "I don't think they all are," she said.

NorQuest College chair Wendy Kinsella, a former city councillor who ran unsuccessfully for the Tories against Liberal Leader Kevin Taft in 2001, said she would support an impartial appointment process.

But she says her work on the NorQuest board shouldn't be demeaned just because she's a Tory.

"It might be patronage in a way, but it's not a gift. You really have to work hard. ... I'm a card-carrying Conservative, but I think I do a pretty good job on the board."

Stelmach said there was no one incident that prompted him to launch a review of ABCs, but he was concerned about the need for the boards to be

accountable since they allocate or spend 50 per cent of the provincial budget.

Some of the health authority budgets are alone in excess of \$2.5 billion annually.

"At the end of the day, government is held responsible by the electorate (so) we have to make sure we have good people in place."

Tim Plumptre, president of the non-profit, Ottawa-based Institute on Governance, said it's tough to wean governments from making politically motivated appointments.

"What you find very often at the political level is a real reluctance to abandon the power to appoint," he said.

Too often governments appoint people who have been "good party workhorses" rather than people with the skills for the job, Plumptre said.

He suggested Alberta may want to adopt the British Columbia model -- an "exemplary" appointment process "that looks to me like one of the best approaches in the country."

B.C. Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell established a Board Resourcing and Development Office in 2001 in the wake of the province's "Fast Ferry Fiasco," and the guidelines were strengthened in 2004.

Vancouver lawyer Elizabeth Watson, who manages the office, has said the scandal, which cost B.C. taxpayers \$430 million, became "a lightning rod for discussions on the lack of appropriate governance."

In a paper to the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, she noted that B.C.'s recruitment and selection process -- which stresses competency over politics -- "is a leading-edge practice that is equal to the best director recruitment practices in the public sector.

"It's hard to understand why any government would not act quickly and decisively to implement the systems necessary to recruit the most qualified directors available," she stated.

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SOME PROMINENT TORIES WITH MULTIPLE APPOINTMENTS

- Audrey Luft, organizer of 2007 Alberta PC annual convention: Alberta Foundation for the Arts (chair), NAIT, Alberta Economic Development Authority
- Doug Goss, Edmonton co-chair of Tories' next election campaign: Capital Health, Alberta Economic Development Authority
- Wayne Jacques, former Conservative MLA: Peace Country Health Region, Transportation Safety Board, Law Enforcement Review Board
- Alf Savage, former PC president: Auto Insurance Rate Board (chair),

Municipal Government Board

- Wendy Kinsella, losing Edmonton PC candidate in 2001: NorQuest College (chair), Capital Health (vice-chair)
- Marvin Moore, former PC campaign manager and cabinet minister: Peace Country Health (chair), Agriculture Marketing Products Council Appeal Tribunal
- Dale Johnson, president of Whitecourt-Ste. Anne PC association: Aspen Health, Credit Counselling Services of Alberta
- Robert Seidel, lawyer to former treasurer Stockwell Day: Grant MacEwan College, Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research
- Skip McDonald, former president of Klein's PC constituency association: Calgary Health, ATB Financial

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