



Sunday » December  
2 » 2007

## Tories take another credibility drubbing over utility legislation

Energy minister's mishandling of proposed bill has angered and alienated everybody in the province

**Graham Thomson**

The Edmonton Journal

*Saturday, December 01, 2007*

Hey kids, if you're looking for something to do this pre-holiday season, drop by the legislative grounds.

Starting next week there'll be skating, ice sculptures, hot chocolate and a wonderland of brightly decorated Christmas trees.

And if you bring along your parents you can join in the latest game at the legislature: hide and seek.

The government has hidden its credibility. Can you help find it?

It was spotted several times this year, most recently when Premier Ed Stelmach dealt with the unfunded teachers' pension problem.

Other times you could make it out if you squinted real hard on issues such as the government's well-meaning but flawed Bill 1, the Lobbyists Act.

This week, though, the government's credibility dropped from view completely. Damned if I know where it is.

On Wednesday night, Tory MLAs hid any shred of government credibility by playing petty politics with Alberta Auditor General Fred Dunn, who appeared before the Legislature Offices Committee. The government MLAs used their majority position on the committee to petulantly reject Dunn's request for \$20,000 to publish his report twice a year instead of once.

The MLAs deny they are a spiteful lot, but an observer could certainly conclude otherwise. The Tories are apparently still angry over Dunn's annual report that suggested the government had allowed \$1 billion a year in energy royalties to slip through its fingers.

When Dunn released his report on October 1, Energy Minister Mel Knight immediately accused the auditor general of launching a "personal attack" against the energy department. It was a bizarre accusation that grabbed reporters' attention and reminded everyone that when it comes to undermining government credibility, nobody does it like Mel Knight.

Whenever Knight turns up, the government's credibility vanishes. It's like a

Vegas act or something from a science-fiction movie where two entities can't exist at the same time and place.

Knight is the minister who back in April assured Albertans we were getting our fair share of energy royalties -- and then we learned through two official reports we weren't.

This is the guy who rushed to defend the Energy and Utilities Board in June -- and then had to backtrack when we discovered the EUB had hired private eyes to spy on landowners.

And most injurious for the government, he is the minister responsible for Bill 46, the Alberta Utilities Commission Act, which has managed to unite just about everyone in the province against the government legislation.

The basic idea behind Bill 46 is sound: to split the EUB into two bodies, one to regulate Alberta's electricity sector, the other to deal with oil and gas development.

But the bill also modifies the public hearing process. The government insists the bill merely makes the system more efficient. Critics say it short-circuits democracy. You could make an argument either way. The problem for the government is Mel Knight is the one doing its arguing.

His friends say he is a funny and charming guy in private. The Mel Knight we see in public, especially dealing with the opposition and journalists, is brittle and defensive. He's as funny and charming as a closed fist.

Reporters have discovered if they bring up anything awkward involving the energy department's history, Knight will dismiss the question, saying he wasn't the minister until December 2006.

If reporters bring up anything awkward that has happened since he was appointed to cabinet, Knight will testily accuse them of "living in the past" and will do his best to avoid the question,

usually while backing out of any scrum in which he unhappily finds himself.

In his dealings with the media Knight manages to look both fearful and belligerent, giving the impression of an angry deer caught in the headlights.

His answer to probing questions is often so combative that reporters have taken to calling it his "Get off my porch!" response.

This isn't just a personality dispute between Knight and the media. Through his mishandling of Bill 46, Knight has managed to alienate, upset or frustrate just about anyone who turns on a light switch in Alberta -- from Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier to the Consumers Coalition of Alberta to the Independent Power Producers' Society of Alberta. All have problems with the legislation.

Everybody has questions about how Bill 46 will affect them.

The government can't seem to find convincing answers. Maybe it should try looking in the same remote spot where its credibility is hiding.

[gthomson@thejournal.canwest.com](mailto:gthomson@thejournal.canwest.com)

© The Edmonton Journal 2007

**CLOSE WINDOW**

---

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.