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## What about those grants?

### Liberal MLA's eviction puts spotlight on fair question

Calgary Herald

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Any time an MLA is evicted from the Alberta legislature for using unparliamentary language, it is a judgment call by the speaker. So, reasonable people could disagree with Speaker Ken Kowalski, who ruled an aggressive question from Liberal MLA Bharat Agnihotri merited his expulsion from the chamber.

Kowalski was probably within the precedents to which speakers appeal when confronted with these infrequent occurrences.

Although his approach was clumsy, Agnihotri raised an interesting point.

He didn't get it answered, and Kowalski's determination to invoke the full sanctions available, even stopping Agnihotri's wages until he apologizes to the House (which he did Wednesday), reminds us of Hamlet's famous line about people who "doth protest too much."

The point at issue was an apparent breach of rules regarding Community Initiative Program grants. Grants of up to \$75,000 are made on a matching basis to community groups, and up to \$10,000 where the group can provide no matching funds.

A diligent sleuth working for the Alberta Liberal caucus discovered that a sorority had received one of these non-matching grants in the amount of \$18,000.

A written question to the Alberta Lottery Fund revealed that over three fiscal years beginning in 2002, there had been 43 such grants.

Some must have been significantly over. In 2002/03, for instance, there had been 22 of these non-matching grants. Under the rules, that couldn't have been more than \$220,000. The actual bill to the treasury was \$1,092,377 however -- an average of \$49,653.

Apart from the case of the sorority, Albertans do not even know who got these grants, much less how they came to be treated so generously.

Typically for a question period, the answer Agnihotri received was ministerial waffle.

He followed up with the question that caused the problem: "The Premier, Minister of Finance, Minister of Health, Minister of Sustainable Resource Development all have secret donors to their leadership campaign. (True.) Can

this minister assure this House that groups receiving this special treatment are not secret friends of top Tories?"

It must be conceded that Alberta's loose accountability standards, which do not require leadership candidates to reveal who their donors are, leave the Tories vulnerable to such insinuation.

However, even among the cheap shots that are daily fare in question period, Agnihotri's was a stretch.

Just what link did he think there might be between grant recipients whose identity he did not know, who received their award between 2002 and March 31, 2005, and four individuals contesting a leadership race in 2006?

That said, Agnihotri did raise a matter of genuine public interest. Albertans should be told:

- Who got the sweetheart deals, and why?
- Who is getting them today, and why?

Then we'll know whether it's worth proceeding to the rest of his question.

Recreation and Culture Minister Hector Goudreau said Wednesday he's going to review and, if necessary, clamp down on the grants program.

While he said legitimate projects got funding, he acknowledged in one case a University of Alberta sorority house get \$18,000 -- almost twice the grant money it asked for -- to buy high-end furniture, including a trophy case and bar stools.

Tantalizing stuff. Taxpayers eagerly await more detail.

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