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Who wouldn't want a deal like Smith's?

Don Braid

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Murray Smith's pay-me-if-I-quit clause is a classic. Who wouldn't want one? Imagine the pleasure of that final phone call to the boss -- "I resign, so send me \$105,000 for the next six months I don't work."

Smith, the former energy minister from Calgary-Varsity, somehow had this clause written into his contract, which brought him \$210,000 a year as Alberta's Washington representative.

Don't blame Smith. Generally speaking, people who work for pay are welcome to as much as they can get. It's extremely rare, except among saints and madmen, to turn down money somebody else is foolishly willing to pay.

In this case, though, the donors are the taxpayers via the government. And the name on the contract belongs to Ed Stelmach, who's always telling audiences the money he spends belongs to us, not to him or his government.

The government also went to extraordinary lengths to keep this contract private. The CBC's requests were rejected for three years. A privacy commission adjudicator finally ruled there is no reason to keep the details secret.

So the government emitted the thing in the waning hours of the fall legislature. The timing was justified by the rules of release, but when you keep something in your pocket for three years, its sudden appearance can look suspicious.

Smith isn't his usual talkative self. In an e-mail Thursday, he told me: "The contract is three years old. I've moved on. No comment."

The premier defends the deal vociferously. "I stand by the contract," he says. Stelmach has little choice, since he signed it.

He's right about one thing, though; Smith was an able representative in Washington during the George W. Bush era.

His good-old-boy style often seemed as Texan as Albertan. He moved easily in the blustery Bush power elite at a time when energy issues were crucial. This is no small feat. A pseudo-diplomat from a place like Alberta, if he isn't skilled, can spend a lot of time sharpening his pencil in hopes of writing down an appointment.

Alberta's Washington hand has to influence U.S. policy without annoying his

own country. Smith did so with back-slapping skill.

His replacement, Gary Mar (whose contract we'll probably see in three years, after another FOIP battle) is a different type.

Smoother and lower-key, but very bright, Mar could prove effective with the Democratic regime expected to replace the Republicans.

So this job is no sinecure. Nor is there any harm in appointing ex-politicians. The best of them have the contacts, skills and personalities to move in this complex world.

But Smith's payout provision is both generous and unusual -- and so is the government's refusal to release it for so long, even when it was passing rules to reveal compensation for senior officials.

As the FOIP adjudicator noted, Smith agreed to have the details of his salary released, as a condition of employment. And Smith didn't exercise his right to appeal the ruling.

So, why the big secret about \$105,000 in non-standard padding? It's suggestive, if not quite definitive, that other Alberta representatives abroad don't have this perk. They must be steaming today.

dbraid@shaw.ca

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