

Rigid walls of partisanship divide this old House

BY MURRAY MANDRYK, THE LEADER-POST JUNE 19, 2009

If one ever needed a classic example of how political partisanship impedes most things -- including the truth -- at the Saskatchewan legislature, look no further than this week's debate on Bill 80, The Construction Industry Labour Relations Amendment Act 2009.

Add another casualty as the hearing started on Wednesday: Accountability. For the first time in a quarter century of covering events at the legislature, I witnessed reporters being barred from a room where elected officials were publicly debating law. Ostensibly, the reason the media wasn't allowed in was because there was no room for them because of the larger-than-anticipated crowd of tradespeople that had taken up the chairs that are filled on a first-come, first-served basis. (This proved to be a rather disadvantageous system to the reporters, who -- unlike some of the government committee MLAs who complained Thursday that most media seats were left vacant, anyway -- are actually paid to do more than warm the cushy committee room chairs for hours on end.)

Of course, with the hearings broadcast on the Internet and carried within the legislative building on close-circuit television, the government committee members weren't especially interested in listening to any such concerns Wednesday. Frankly, though, the fact they weren't particularly interested in much of anything that might have altered their already-made-up minds is exactly the problem.

The truth be told -- and contrary to the false assertion of committee chair Greg Ottenbreit -- the trades people that came to the legislature Wednesday did not come at the behest of the NDP Opposition. They came out of deeply held concerns that this legislation threatens higher wages and might restrict their access to future jobs.

The truth be told is that the union members' umbrella organization, the Building and Trades Council, doesn't have a history of labour unrest. Its members want to make as much money as possible during this construction boom and they are the least of the Saskatchewan Party government's problems. The council's unions, which haven't struck in 17 years, likely have a far better relationship with their employers than the public sector unions of Saskatchewan now have with their employer -- the government of Saskatchewan.

The closest thing we've heard from the government this week to a completely honest admission might have come from Advanced Education, Employment and Labour Minister Rob Norris who let it slip Wednesday that his government "predominately listened to business" in preparing this bill. The truth be told is this legislation is being primarily driven by construction businesses that prefer "wall-to-wall" unionization where everyone on a job site would belong to one union. The Sask. Party government, the truth be told, would simply prefer to see this for both practical and philosophical reasons.

And for all the rhetoric about "freedom of choice" for unionized workers and allowing in "wall-to-wall" unions like the controversial Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) and the Communications,

Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) to "build capacity", these unions are generally in the business of raiding each other for members rather than "building capacity".

The truth be told is that the construction industry is different on the critical point that it's seldom full-time work. It's a cyclical industry where the trade employee often has no relationship with the employer once the job ends.

And despite all the red herrings thrown out about the skills shortage or the need to "build capacity", legislators have to know full well that they can not legislate more skilled labour to coming here.

This is not to say that grandstanding NDP MLAs in these hearings have always had the monopoly on the truth. They may very well be blowing out of proportion the problem of having CLAC or any other wall-to-wall union in the province. The truth be told, after the attempt to implement available hours in 2003 and the Crown Construction Tendering Agreement in the 1990s, there may be good reason not to trust much of anything NDP MLAs have to say about labour laws.

Thus the problem at the legislature. The truth be told, most MLAs aren't interested in hearing any truth that doesn't confirm their already partisan views.

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