

Sask. Party: mixed messages on ideology

BY MURRAY MANDRYK, THE LEADER-POST JUNE 20, 2009

Premier Brad Wall's Saskatchewan Party government is sitting at an interesting place right now -- on a precipice from which it might yet climb to extraordinary heights, or fall backwards, weighed down by its own ideology.

This week, it offered signals that it could be heading either way.

Exactly where you strike the balance between your own ideological beliefs and serving everyone's interests is a conundrum for any government. But it's especially difficult for right-wing governments in Saskatchewan that: find the nature of bureaucracy foreign; tend to be naturally distrustful of the civil service, and; feel an insatiable need to immediately undo all things viewed as NDP and social democrat in a term or two for fear that their tenure will only last that long.

Just consider the two major political developments this week.

The first was Tuesday's announcement of a shuffle of deputy ministers in the wake of last month's cabinet shuffle -- a development in which two deputies were shown the door. Former deputy minister of social services Allan Hansen (brought in less than a year ago to replace Duncan Fisher, who evidently locked horns and lost the battle with Minister Donna Harpauer) and municipal affairs deputy minister Terry Coleman (the former Moose Jaw police chief who was temporarily suspended and eventually moved out of his previous role as deputy minister of corrections, public safety and policing in the wake of last summer's Regina jail breakout) left government by "mutual agreement". Given that they received severance packages upon their departure, there's little doubt they were dismissed without cause.

What's intriguing, however, is a) deputy ministers leaving with severance are rare events in government and extraordinarily rare so long after a change in government, and b) these two weren't leftovers from the previous NDP administration, but specifically recruited by the Wall administration. One might argue that this is a horrific development for Saskatchewan taxpayers who are now having to pay healthy severances to two more deputies -- the very deputies the Sask. Party government hired to replace the deputies and other senior civil servants that the Sask. Party fired (at a cost to the taxpayers of \$10.7 million) for "not being philosophically compatible" with the new government.

But others knowledgeable in the field of labour and government relations suggest there is a more positive take on these two deputy minister dismissals. Alan Levy, out-going assistant professor of industrial relations and human resource management at the University of Regina, suggests it may be a sign of maturity when a government begins to recognize that government is not like business and that people brought in because they were successful elsewhere are not automatically successful in government.

Citing the other significant deputy ministerial change this month that saw Sask. Party appointment Garnet Garven replaced as Wall's deputy minister by long-time civil servant Doug Moen (who, by the way, recommended the replacement of Hansen and Coleman), Levy said successful governments are ones that develop and take guidance from a professional civil service that's seen as non-partisan and representing the interests of all Saskatchewan people.

"This shows that there is a learning curve here and Premier Wall is learning," Levy said.

The problem, however, is that the evidence emerging out of Wednesday's hearings on Bill 80 -- The Construction Industry Labour Relations Amendment Act 2009 -- and past labour legislation fights on essential services and the Trade Union Act reveals this government to be partisanly right-wing on many critical issues with little capacity or interest in seeking out broader perspectives.

Levy rightfully suggests that deeply held differing views on things like labour legislation are often only resolved through the court system and that Saskatchewan labour may be struggling after years of being seen as the previous NDP administration's "perfect child". But that said, the seemingly unnecessary fight on Bill 80 and perhaps other labour law changes reveal a government struggling to "learn to deal with all facets and groups in society."

It was a week in which the Sask. Party government revealed it could still go either of two ways.

- Mandryk is the Leader-Post's political columnist.

© Copyright (c) The Regina Leader-Post