

Sask. Party, unions make hard work of their relationship

BY MURRAY MANDRYK, THE LEADER-POST SEPTEMBER 5, 2009

While some might suggest that the simple solution to Saskatchewan's labour relationship problem would be to remove the major combatants, the issue goes much deeper than that.

The long-standing problem didn't just begin with Advanced Education, Employment and Labour Minister Rob Norris and Saskatchewan Federation of Labour leader Larry Hubich. Really, the two respective leaders are more like a symptom.

But the very fact that both have been allowed to evolve into the extreme caricatures of right-wing politician and left-wing labour leader that they now are says much about the depth of labour relations problems in Saskatchewan right now. Consider their modus operandi:

The more condescendingly Norris behaves towards labour (was it really necessary to talk to union leaders and NDP colleagues as if they were small, dull children during last June's hearings on Bill 80, an act proposing amendments to construction labour relations? Was it really necessary for Norris to start his speech to last October's SFL convention by talking about "fair and balanced" labour legislation?) the more it absolutely delights the chambers of commerce and their individual members, many of whom happen to be generous Saskatchewan Party supporters. And by becoming the target of labour's anger (Remember labour's rather obnoxious and very deliberate decision to invite Norris to speak at the SFL convention last October, then shout him down by singing "Solidarity Forever"?) the labour minister has effectively deflected much of the labour policy heat from Premier Brad Wall. It's hard not to assume this is a very deliberate strategy.

Conversely, the more inflammatory Hubich's rhetoric is, the more it seems to infuriate business and the Sask. Party. And the more it seems to delight the leadership of the province's powerful public sector unions -- the very same union leaders who elect Hubich SFL leader.

It's all a little self-serving, isn't it? Actually, it is worse than that. It's self-perpetuating. The more Hubich screams on his blog about the corporate elite pigs at the trough trampling on the rights of workers (remember last January, when he advocated the auto factories be handed over to the workers?) the easier it makes Norris's job. And the more Norris ignores the concerns raised by the unions and the more disdain with which he treats the union leadership, the more labour is convinced that it needs the flamboyant leadership that Hubich provides.

Welcome to the weirdest symbiotic relationship in the animal kingdom -- one where the very survival of both partners is totally based on how successful they are at killing each other.

But what about the rest of us, who tend to be caught up in the crossfire? Has either business or labour benefited from this long-running nonsense?

Thus the problem. We desperately need a change of approach to a situation that's untenable now and getting progressively worse.

The first move -- the so-called olive branch -- really has to come from the Sask. Party. And that opportunity is now before it, if it significantly modifies Bill 80, which is clearly a gratuitous attempt to hammer the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council.

Ironically, the Sask. Party government has had significant success in reaching out to those that aren't necessarily its natural constituents by establishing solid relationships between ministers and individual groups. (The prime example being, Health Minister Don McMorris's relationship with the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses.) Well, perhaps Enterprise Minister Ken Cheveldayoff can establish a working relationship with the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council and its business manager Terry Parker.

But labour needs to tone down the rhetorical nonsense, too. Hopefully, we'll hear that from Parker at the Labour Day picnic his organization is sponsoring Monday. As University of Brandon business and labour professor Allan Levy puts it: "Our mothers always said you get more with honey than lemons. The two (labour and government) need to start making lemonade."

After all, why can't we be both pro-labour and pro-business?

Or is better to have this ongoing feud that only benefits those who perpetuate it?

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

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