

When last become first, worry

BY MURRAY MANDRYK, SASKATCHEWAN NEWS NETWORK; REGINA LEADER-POST MAY 8, 2010

In a week when it seemed almost every Saskatchewan Party cabinet minister was running into problems, Advanced Education, Employment and Labour Minister Rob Norris is a good gauge of how the government is doing.

After all, when the young Saskatchewan Party government was riding high on a wave of unprecedented resource revenue, it was Norris who seemed to set the low-end standard of its performance.

As hard as it may have been to do worse in dealing with a hostile labour movement, Norris still managed to pour gas on the fire.

His pompous, partisan manner was an annoying distraction from anything of relevance he might have had to say. And given his dogged determination to stick to his assigned talking points, it was never easy to find anything relevant in what he had to say.

Because of this Norris wasn't seen as an advocate for his labour stakeholders, and quickly came to be loathed by them.

This was apparent again this week when he met with Terry Parker, the business manager for the Saskatchewan Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council, in a last-ditch appeal by the council to stop passage of Bill 80 -- the government's controversial legislation affecting the construction industry.

Suffice to say, things didn't go well.

One can assume the labour leader wanted to know why the minister didn't consider concerns raised during public hearings, but instead presented a bill that's almost identical to what Saskatchewan Construction Association executive director Michael Fougere requested in an October 2008 letter to cabinet.

Not listening to concerns raised in public hearings seems to be a growing problem for this government. Consultation, it seems to think, means only listening to what it wants to hear.

Just as they prepared to part ways, the minister confronted Parker over an encounter Premier Brad Wall had had with angry Building Trades Council members when he and his family were checking into a Regina hotel for the Saskatchewan Party's convention in March.

Even Parker acknowledges that encounter wasn't cordial.

Angry construction workers were clearly louder and more boorish than they should have been and, although he won't speak of it, there's little doubt Wall was angered by it all.

But it wasn't helpful to Wall, his government or anyone else for Norris to take it upon himself to raise this matter angrily -- especially in the context of the ongoing frustration unionized construction workers have over this legislation.

In fact, it only reinforced the suspicion that Norris simply doesn't like union members and is refusing to amend Bill 80 in retaliation.

But if Norris once represented set the low bar for ministers' willingness to consult or be held accountable, his cabinet colleagues are doing their level best to surpass him.

Compared with the woeful performances recently of Environment Minister Nancy Heppner and Health Minister Don McMorris when it comes to consultation or accountability, Norris's handling of the labour file no longer stands out for ineptitude.

Moreover, credit should be given where it's due. Norris has done better in other areas of his portfolio.

For example, he wrote this week to federal Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Minister Chuck Strahl to inform him that the First Nation University of Canada had met the criteria for restoring provincial funding, and politely urged the feds to follow suit.

It should be seen as a major success for Norris and the Saskatchewan Party government if Ottawa were to restore all or some of FNUC's funding.

It would be evidence that Norris's actions forced accountability and professionalism upon an institution that thought it was immune.

That said, Norris still struggles as a labour minister.

So, when he becomes one of the shining lights in the cabinet, it's time for the government to take stock.