

Lougheed shuns tough interview sources allege

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By ANDY IMLACH

Premier Peter Lougheed and his three western counterparts have backed away from a potentially tough interview next week with one of Canada's most irascible broadcasters.

Industry sources say an hour-long encounter between the four western premiers and often-belligerent Vancouver broadcaster Jack Webster was cancelled when Premier Lougheed refused to do the show with a "negative" questioner like Mr. Webster.

The other three western premiers were also reportedly "lukewarm" to sitting down with Mr. Webster at the western premiers conference in Lethbridge Monday.

But sources say the main opposition came from Edmonton, where Premier Lougheed was not prepared to submit himself to the Webster style of acid-tongued journalism.

Mr. Webster, a television personality and radio talk show host, has thrown unswerving questions in a rasping Scottish accent at the likes of Pierre Trudeau and Joe Clark; but he has never interviewed Premier Lougheed.

The program was altered and Premier Lougheed and his three colleagues will instead be questioned on national and western issues by Bruce Hogle, manager of news and public affairs at CFRN.

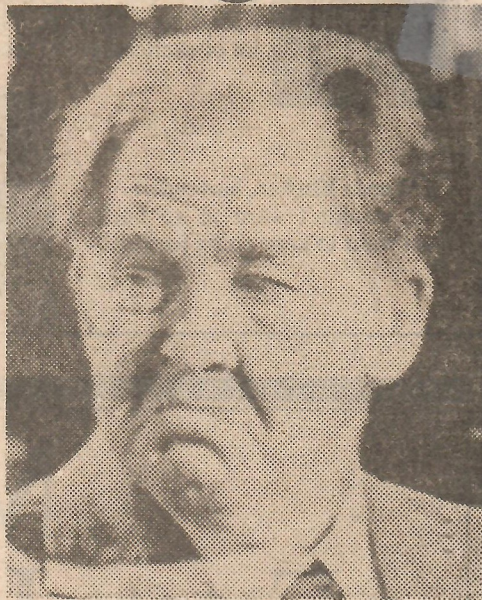
The program will be carried Monday night live at 6:30 p.m. on CFRN in Edmonton and CFCN in Calgary. It will be taped live for showing later that night in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. British Columbia Television backed out of the deal in a move they say was related to financial cutbacks, not the canning of their interviewer.

Word of the reason for the last-minute change comes within days of a private speech by Premier Lougheed to the Alberta Conservative convention in which he criticized the media for "distorting" news on his government.

At a separate news conference Wednesday, Liberal leader Nick Taylor agreed the media had treated the government unfairly recently for picking on bureaucratic problems. But he also added the unfair treatment followed years of "thinking Lougheed was born in a manger in west Calgary."

Thompson MacDonald, CFCN vice-president of news and public affairs programming, rejected a suggestion the premier was manipulating the news by dictating who could ask him questions.

"If you're getting at a story that Lougheed killed Webster, you're wrong.



Premier Lougheed and the other western premiers have backed away from facing this man, crusty Vancouver broadcaster Jack Webster. Instead, they'll be interviewed by CFRN's Bruce Hogle

Nobody killed Webster," he said.

Mr. Webster's name was originally "floated" and the response was "lukewarm from around the Prairies," while B.C. Premier Bill Bennett was less lukewarm than the others, said Mr. MacDonald.

Mr. Hogle was the second choice and no one objected, he said.

Ron Liepert, Premier Lougheed's press secretary, said the premier only objected because Mr. Webster is not from Alberta.

"All four provinces felt since the conference was in Alberta, it should be a host from Alberta," he said.

"The premier was not interested in doing a program with Jack Webster as host," he said, insisting the premier was not afraid of any negative Webster style.

Mr. Webster said from Vancouver that he had not been told why he had been dropped.

"I find it hard to believe Peter Lougheed is nervous about appearing with Webster when he is hammering Trudeau into the ground, the second toughest guy in Canada," he said.

"I'm not in the least bit negative."

"I'm a bit abrasive, I tend to bark, but that's part of my charm," said Mr. Webster.