Public Affairs department faces shakeup

By DARCY HENTON
Legislature Bureau

Alberta's much-criticized government public affairs bureau could be in for a major make-over.

A three-member task force is expected make recommendations next month to bring the 30-year-old bureau up to speed with today's communications challenges.

Task force chairman Ron Liepert, press secretary for former Premier Peter Lougheed, said the task force has been studying how public affairs bureaus work in other provinces and the federal government.

"We'll take that information and make recommendations about what we feel would be the best model for going forward in Alberta," Liepert said.

The $14.6-million public relations machine has often been criticized by opposition parties for "spinning" stories to make the Tory government look good rather than just reporting the facts.

The Liberals say the bureau is too fat and too one-sided in its dispensation of information.

"Every day they churn out press releases that are not about telling Albertans what is in their best interests, but what is in the best interests of the party in power," said critic Laurie Blakeman."

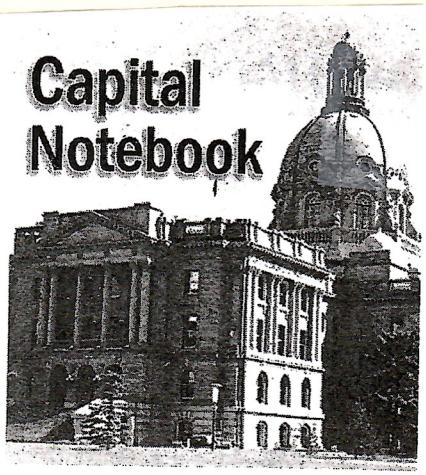
The bureau has also been blasted by Tory MLAs who complain that it doesn't do a good enough job of getting government's good news into newspapers and TV and radio newscasts.



Laurie Blakeman Slams P.R.

"We're getting pounded on for one thing here and there's all sorts of good stories over here and they don't seem to be getting out," Calgary-Northhill MLA Richard Magnus fumed at a recent Tory committee meeting.

Blakeman said Liepert is expected to come down with recommendations to restructure the bureau so that individual cabinet ministers get control of their own public relations directors.



PAB changes considered

The government's much-maligned Public Affairs Bureau came under the microscope last week as Premier Ralph Klein and his caucus debated whether to reform the government's PR arm.

The bureau, which is staffed by civil servants, has long been accused by the opposition of being little more than a taxpayer-funded propaganda arm of the Alberta PC party. But interestingly, the impetus for the government's examination is that many Tories are frustrated the bureau isn't partisan enough.

One suggestion considered by a committee, chaired by Calgary MLA Ron Liepert, was giving ministers an allowance to hire partisan press secretaries, hired and fired at their discretion. Departmental spokespersons would remain members of the civil service, unaffected by changes in ministers and governments.

Klein suggested that would likely be more than he is willing to consider.

"Blowing it up? No, we're not blowing it up," Klein said. He said he is open to making changes as long as it doesn't require "another layer of bureaucracy."

He added he's also not about to cede control of the PAB, which reports to him.

Tory MLA **Ron Liepert** (Calgary-West) was named this week by Premier **Ralph Klein** to chair a three-person committee to review the mandate of the ***Public Affairs Bureau*** (PAB)—the communications arm of the government.

In an interview with *The Armet Report* this week, the rookie MLA suggested that every aspect of the PAB operation, which was created in the mid-seventies, will come under the microscope, including whether it should remain in existence.

Liepert indicated that his committee will be meeting with the major stakeholders of the PAB—such as advertising agencies, the media and MLAs, along with members of the public, to determine whether Albertans are receiving "quality, coordinated and cost-effective communications services".

Other members of the committee include **Crosbie Cotton,** the former editor in chief of the Calgary Herald, and **Judith Dyck,** a communications consultant.

A report by the committee is expected to be presented by Liepert at the government caucus retreat in September.