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CALGARY'S EYE ON ALBERTA POLITICS

EDMONTON

There's a degree of unease pending a review of the province's public affairs bureau that's to be presented to Tory MLAs next week.

The so-called PAB, the **Ralph Klein** government's communications wing, has been criticized by some as a partisan purveyor of Tory government spin. It's supposed to provide neutral messaging on government programs and services.

The province decided to assess the PAB function, and the panel it chose to do the work reportedly recommends blowing up the bureau.

Under the existing system, all communications personnel are employed by the PAB. Communications directors for the departments of health or justice, for example, don't work for the respective ministers, they answer to the PAB. In theory, anyway.

The proposal would see communications directors attached to standing policy committees.

SPCs, as they're known, were created in the early days of the Klein administration to vet government initiatives before they become policy. There are six SPCs covering every department in government.

The idea now is to attach communications directors to each, responsible for mapping out long-term "strategic" information campaigns.

Assistant directors would work directly for each minister.

Not sure how that's going to go over with cabinet ministers, who would essentially lose access to their top communicators.

The word is, few if any jobs would be lost, as most people within the PAB would be shuffled to other departments.

Don't expect this one to reach the implementation stage anytime soon, though. Even if Tory MLAs like it, Klein will likely be loathe to embark on a major shakeup of a key department in the twilight of his premiership.