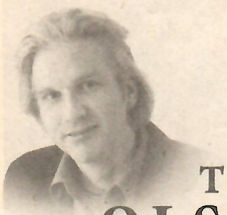
Sept 30 /06

Tories urged to dig deeper to make rural Alberta's voice heard



TOM OLSEN
CALGARY'S EYE ON ALBERTA POLITICS

EDMONTON

Pity Doug Graham.

The nagging headache that's slowly coming on is destined to be a full-blown, nausea-inducing migraine by the time Nov. 25 and the first ballot for Tory leader rolls around.

Graham is the president of Alberta's Progressive Conservative party, and is the target of every complaint about the campaign and vote to replace Ralph Klein.

There are plenty of complaints.

Thursday it was the number of polling stations in rural Alberta.

Now it's the cut the party takes from membership sales, and what some Tories consider a dearth of advanced polling stations before Ralph's successor is chosen.

But first, some old business.

One of the bubbling areas of concern is the ease or lack thereof that country types will have casting ballots for their preferred next leader.

Friday's column noted the party will decide how many polling stations will be in each rural riding — most of which are sprawling — and where they will be located.

Bright and early (well, 8:30 a.m.-ish), the crazy-chicken ring tone signals a cellphone call.

"Olsen?"

Yes.

"Liepert."

It's the always warm Ron Liepert, MLA for Calgary-West, former press secretary to Peter Lougheed and committed Jim Dinning backer.

Liepert's bugged because there are rumours pulsating that Dinning's camp is somehow pressing party brass to limit the number of polling stations in the country.

See, Dinning's viewed as the slick city guy, popular with the high-density population crowd, with rural Alberta set to be carved up primarily between Ted Morton, Lyle Oberg and Ed Stelmach.

Whole bunch of myths there, says Ron. First off, Dinning has 10 rural MLAs in his camp, so he wouldn't want to limit their ability to get people out. (Cuddly Ron actually put it like this: "Why the hell would we try to impair their vote?")

Late Friday, Dinning himself put out a statement calling for enough polling stations so everyone's happy, as did Klein.

"Doug," wrote Ralph. "This process should be about getting the most people engaged and out to vote. Let's not put barriers in the way to prevent this."

Polling stations could ultimately number many. Consider this: Frank Oberle, MLA for Peace River, says even with six in his area, none will be closer than 100 km apart.

The Mark Norris camp went on the attack, too. Take the decision away from Graham and the party, and leave it to individual constituencies to decide how many they need.

"We want the party to do all it can to ensure fair and equal access across Alberta, rural or urban," said Norris. "One of our core principles is openness and accessibility. Let's be sure we're doing all we can to follow it."

Back to Liepert, who switched to slamming the party's plans for advance polls.

Party president Graham says there will be one each in Edmonton and Calgary, with about 45 or 50 more across the province. Some constituencies will share stations at the borders between ridings.

Says Liepert: "We feel the party is setting people up for chaos, with one advance poll in the cities of Edmonton and Calgary. They should have four advanced polls, in the four quadrants."

That would make a total of eight for the two cities.

"They're taking all the money, so don't give me the story they don't have money for four polling stations," said Ron.

Here's some background on that one. When there's no leadership campaign, the party takes $2 of each $5 membership purchased, with $2 more going to the constituency association where it was sold, and $1 to the local MLA's trust fund for the next election.

Now, Tory brass reap $4, with the final buck to the trust fund.

"Because there is a huge expense, and the party is covering most of that," said Graham. "We have to pay for all the advertising, ballot production."

As for the grumbling and potential for migraine, Graham fully expected it when he sought the voluntary president's position.

"It's a bit of a hockey game and we're the referees," he said. "When you're a referee you expect some skirmishes. On the other hand, you don't want a boring game."

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Dinning remains the front-runner



Feb 3/05

TOM OLSEN
CALGARY'S EYE ON ALBERTA POLITICS

EDMONTON

Jim Dinning's people started coming out of the woodwork first thing Wednesday morning.

Or coming out of the voice mail, at least.

"I happened to be with Jim Dinning all evening on the night of the provincial election," says Calgary MLA Ron Liepert in a message recorded at 9:26 a.m. (OK, so not exactly first thing in the morning).

"Whoever is spreading the rumour Jim Dinning pumped his fist in the air with glee at the defeat of Mark Norris is absolutely wrong.

"I just feel it's important to set the record straight, and if you need I could trot out about 75 other people who would say the same thing."

There you have it. Jim Dinning isn't a sleaze, though I didn't suggest he was.

Just passing along a rumour that Dinning wasn't exactly grief-stricken that Norris, a competitor for the Tory leadership, lost his Edmonton seat last election.

But thanks, Ron. You cleared matters up, and I hope this helps get you a cabinet post in a Dinning administration.