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Alberta Scan

Issue 590 week ending 20 October 2006

The Toronto of Alberta...

What is the Progressive Conservative leadership campaign about? At this point, after countless forums, pages (both web and paper) of policy pronouncements and rumours about membership sales, it is difficult to discern.

It's not about health care. It's not about photo radar. It's not about vision. The campaigns just don't seem to be capturing the imagination of anyone.

Given that this is an election within the PC party, perhaps how people vote will be decided on issues that impact individual members and how they see their party, despite attempts by various candidates to sell broad-based platforms.

The publication on the Internet this week of a string of erroneous rumours about **Jim Dinning** unintentionally may show this perspective.

Dinning describes the rumours as "whoppers", but they also might be interpreted as sign posts to a deeper concern, not only about his campaign, but about other campaigns and the nature and future of the PC party itself. Some of the rumours have had wide currency (that he plans to privatize the Alberta Treasury Branches); some are more obscure (that he is a lawyer). Such misinformed scuttlebutt is the inevitable chatter of any campaign, each rumour representing a distorted word of mouth about a candidate, signaling how people feel, regardless of the truth.

Consider the campaign to date from the rumour perspective, then.

Rumour: ATB

The rumour/response from the **Dinning** web site: *"**Jim** will sell Alberta Treasury Branches. WRONG. ATB is not for sale. **Jim** believes that ATB's customers receive great service. That's why they remain customers. ATB is a vital part of the financial network that's helping fuel our prosperity."*

Of all the rumours listed, this one potentially is the most damaging as long as it has currency because it hurts **Dinning** in rural Alberta, where he is believed by his opponents to be the weakest in terms of membership sales and support.

Interestingly, **Dinning** in his refutation does not address the most important reason why this is such a damaging rumour. It is not about quality of service—it is whether there will be service at all. ATB is one of the few financial institutions that continues to operate in rural Alberta. Eastern-based banks long ago decided it was much more cost effective to replace rural branches with strategically located ATMs. The banks have a reputation of not wanting to lend money to rural enterprises. For instance, in the mid-1990s when the Canadian Bankers' Association sought provin-

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cial government support in their attempts to provide insurance, testy back bench Conservative MLAs of the time instead wanted to talk about how difficult it was for their rural constituents to obtain loans. (*See Alberta Scan, 25 August 1995, page six.*)

Not much has changed. ATB remains a potent symbol of the provincial government providing for the needs of rural residents where corporate Canada does not. **Dinning** did not publish the other part of the rumour—that the supposed reason for the privatization is a significant contribution from another financial institution that wants to buy ATB.

That's why **Ed Stelmach** mentions the ATB every time he speaks. He wants to reinforce the rumour by emphasizing his own position that he would never sell the ATB and thereby sow further doubt about **Dinning** in rural Alberta.

The **Dinning** camp challenges the assumption that their candidate is weak in rural Alberta at all. Calgary MLA **Ron Liepert**, an avid **Dinning** supporter, points out that **Dinning** has the support of 14 MLAs from outside of Edmonton and Calgary.

He also says it is a misconception that rural voters are somehow more politically active and will be a more significant factor in the November 25 vote than urban voters. On the second weekend of the 1992 PC party leadership vote that elected **Ralph Klein**, almost 50 per cent of those who turned out were from outside Edmonton and Calgary (*see table below*). Of the 71,000 who voted for the two candidates remaining in the race, about 26,000 were from Calgary, about 35,000 from outside the two major cities. If you remove voters in Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, Red Deer, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat from the totals, the per cent of votes cast outside cities in 1992 drops to 42 per cent, versus 15 per cent from Edmonton and 36 per cent from Calgary. Closer, but rural is still important. Unknown is whether the same pattern will hold in this vote. Candidates weaker in rural areas downplay the strength of rural participation, those weaker in Calgary pin their hopes on it.

1992 Leadership Second Ballot Results

	Klein	McBeth	Margin	Total
Total Vote				71,325
Total Candidate	44,122	27,203	22,147	
% of total vote	61.9%	38.1%		
Total Edmonton	3,920	6,534	2,614	10,454
% of total vote	8.9%	24.0%		14.7%
Total Calgary	17,027	8,756	8,271	25,783
% of total vote	38.6%	32.2%		36.1%
Total Other	23,175	11,913	11,262	35,088
% of total vote	52.5%	43.8%		49.2%
Total Rural	20,650	9,565	11,085	30,215
% of Total vote	46.8%	35.2%		42.4%

NOTES: The data on this table are from media reports the day after the vote. "Other" includes cities outside Edmonton and Calgary, "Rural" does not.

This rumour isn't about ATB, this rumour is about who will best serve rural Alberta, a key regional concern.

Rumour: Sweet Deal

The rumour: *"**Jim Dinning** gave Canadian Pacific a sweet deal that sees the Alberta Government paying a subsidy on containers shipped outside the province. WRONG. **Jim Dinning** was the Provincial Treasurer who reminded everyone that government should not be in the business of business. True then. True now."*

What is interesting about this rumour is not its content, but the reiteration of the philosophy of the **Klein** Conservatives from the 1990s, that the provincial government "should not be in the business of business". Wait a minute—didn't the **Dinning** camp just say it would not privatize ATB? That means his campaign should amend the philosophy that it will "not be in the business of business, except for financial services."

This rumour underlines the perception that the interests of a **Jim Dinning** administration will be with the Calgary corporate sector, not the province as a whole. It is therefore connected to the ATB concern—who will look after the interest of Albertans outside Calgary?

As he points out, **Dinning** has spent much of his career in the public sector in Edmonton, not the private sector in Calgary. He has a master's degree in public (not business) administration from Queen's University in Kingston, he was successively a political assistant, a senior bureaucrat and a provincial cabinet minister until leaving government in 1997 to spend time in the Calgary corporate sector. Yet he likes to stress his private sector experience. This has led to the next rumour.

Rumour: Owned by Business

The rumour: *"**Jim Dinning** is owned by business. WRONG. **Jim** has always been his own man. Takes responsibility for his own decisions. And that's not going to change when he's leader and premier. What **Jim** likes most about this one is that he used to hear that he didn't have experience in the private sector. So now he has that business experience. And plenty of volunteer not-for-profit experience. All that makes him an ideal leader for all of Alberta."*

This is a variation on the fear that **Dinning** will put the interests of Calgary business in particular and Calgary in general ahead of the interests of the prov-

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