

Tory battle lines drawn Controversial power project breeds dissension

By RICK BELL

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Energy Minister Mel Knight is pushing for a controversial multibillion-dollar power line project. (Sun File Photo)

Mel Knight, Premier Ed's bumbling, fumbling energy czar, is found mumbling out of both sides of his mouth.

Meanwhile, some of Ed's own Tories revolt over the province's closed-door plan to jam through two huge north-south power lines without any public discussion, a scheme hitting us hard in the pocketbook and maybe not even the best way to provide electricity.

All this, the day after Fred (Get It) Dunn, the watchdog over our money, catalogues quite the collection of dirt dished by the powers-that-be. Fred uncovers millions in taxpayer dough gone down the drain as bigshots bounced off the provincial payroll walk away with bonuses for nothing, gold-plated payoffs and extra pensions in what amounts to a raid on the public treasury approved by the authorities. Now, this latest jolt.

First off, Mumbling Mel sends a letter to Mayor Bronco. The letter comes at the end of '07, after the last attempt to get a big power line approved falls apart when it's revealed the province's energy regulator hires private eyes to spy on opponents of the line.

Knowing the thumbs-up of a north-south power line will go back to Square 1, Mel insists "there will be a formal hearing again."

"A joint needs application and application for permits and licensing is being discussed and would involve public input," he writes.

Then, Mel gets to the costs of the power line. It's estimated to "add approximately between 80 cents and a dollar to the average householder's monthly bill."

Fast forward to now. We have two big power lines and the cost has gone up five times. Instead of 80 cents a line or \$1.60 for two, it's \$8.

And that's \$8 on the average bill throughout the province. For the actual use on a typical family house is more like double that or more, around \$200-plus a year in added charges.

As for the decision on the need for such pricey power lines, there will now be no formal hearings and no public input. The companies owning the lines will go around the province trying to sell the lines and Mel will mumble "blackout" and "brownout" as required.

But this isn't all about Calgary.

Oh no, at next month's Tory gabfest, where Ed's leadership, such as it is, will be on the line, Tories are bringing forward four resolutions on power lines, three from Edmonton and area.

The one with the biggest whack, though, is from the riding of Ted Morton, a member of Ed's inner circle who ran for Tory leader.

The Conservatives in Ted's area want an Alberta Utilities Commission investigation on the need for the lines, a cost-benefit analysis and a look-see of all other options for electricity.

These members of Ed and Mel's own party say the province is taking a decision worth billions behind closed doors. Ed and Mel and the government paper-shufflers don't have "the technical capability and competence" to judge what's best.

No kidding.

They say this move will "reduce public and investor confidence in Alberta's electricity market" and there's "no evidence" building these lines is the only way to ensure secure electricity.

New technology supports power plants closer to the people they serve. The billions spent on these lines may be a lot more expensive than other ways and will hurt Alberta's competitiveness.

The projects "have not been demonstrated to be critical to keeping the lights on" and violate Mel's commitment to being open.

They peg the whack to the wallet as an added \$340 a year by 2018, not including inflation and the costs to business who will pass the bill to us. They also say if the lines are really to ship juice stateside then those making the money should cough up the cash.

Another group of Tories in St. Albert also feel the tab for large-scale electricity projects could hurt consumers.

These folks are all people who just want a decision directly affecting me and you done in public.

At Calgary city council, everyone from Ald. Druh Farrell to Ald. Ric McIver, want power lines approved in public and send a letter to Ed and Mel. The idea to push the province is proposed by Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart.

Yes, Big Red knows Ed is no Mr. Popularity, having carried his flag and lost badly in the byelection.

Besides, everyone should be interested in power. After all, nobody really likes to be kept in the dark.

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