

LIBERALS FRET AS CAMPBELL REFUSES THEM A FRESH START¹

Vaughn Palmer

While Premier Gordon Campbell attended a climate action summit in California on Monday, the temperature back home was rising over his determination to cling to office for however long it takes the B.C. Liberal party to choose a new leader. Cabinet minister Bill Bennett spoke for a growing number of Liberals when he described the situation as "horribly awkward." The leadership vote is still weeks or perhaps several months away. Campbell, dismissing calls for a caretaker premier, gives every sign of continuing with business as usual. And that frustrates those who would like to initiate a clean break with the outgoing premier, by putting a halt to his last-ditch measures.

First and foremost, there's the ambitious reorganization of a half dozen ministries dealing with land, resources and the environment. The initiative was mostly a product of Campbell's own vision for expediting decision-making on Crown land and resources. But he never provided a detailed rationale to the public, to affected interests, or indeed to the ministers and officials charged with implementing the myriad changes, set out in a 44-page cabinet order that the premier himself signed on Oct. 24, just 11 days before he announced he would leave office. Since then, complaints have multiplied across the government at every level. Public servants in the affected ministries are bewildered. They don't know who they are working for. They don't know who they are working with. They don't know what they are supposed to be doing. Outsiders are confused as well. Here's a sample of some of the concerns posted online in response to a preliminary analysis of the changes by George Hoberg, a professor of forest policy at the University of B.C., and undergraduate student Stephanie Taylor. (All comments posted at greenpolicyprof.org/wordpress-- Hoberg's website.)

On the way the forest service has been fractured on the eve of its 100th anniversary:

"Even within the former B.C. Forest Service, it was always challenging to maintain dialogue and linkages between forest policy and operations at provincial, regional and local scales. That was between two divisions, not two ministries as we now have."

On the key element of the change, separating policy-making from operations (permit approvals, monitoring and the like) across all six ministries:

"When policy is separated from operations, the result is major delays. Operations and policy people think about issues differently and have different objectives. When there is no clear authority (i. e., one boss) a lot of discussion and lost time occurs."

From a student, struggling to figure out what it all means:

"I just spent one semester's administration class learning, in depth, the procedures and policies of the ministry of forests. ... Now I have to re-learn a new system."

I've heard worse on a not-for-attribution basis from senior public servants, front-line employees, backbenchers, and cabinet ministers. Far from expediting decision-making, many

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fear the Campbell reorganization will lead to paralysis at best, chaos at worst. Consequently, some Liberals would like to slam the brakes on this reckless exercise, leaving the next leader to sort it out.

Another cause for concern is the premier's penultimate action before announcing he was leaving, the decision to cut provincial income taxes by 15 per cent. The move eliminated virtually all of the unallocated revenue in the three-year fiscal plan. Plus, as more than one observer has noted, mindful of the continuing controversy over the harmonized sales tax, "they cut the wrong damn tax." Just as some Liberals would like to put a hold on the reorganization, others would like to revisit the tax cut so the next premier has some budgetary room to move.

Not easy to do with the author of those changes still at his desk when he is not -- as he was Monday -- hobnobbing with outgoing California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger at a conference dedicated to their common enthusiasm for climate change. Not many Liberals would begrudge him his claim to glory on that file or others. But they are fretful about his stated intention to remain in command of a government that badly needs a fresh start.

With premier and party brass resisting calls for expedited change at the top, some members of the government caucus have drawn attention to Section 61 of the party constitution. "The constitution does not impose any responsibilities on the caucus," it says. "The caucus is not subject to the jurisdiction of any convention or general meeting of the party, the provincial council, the party executive or the appeals board." Meaning the party can't bind the caucus. And in our system, the caucus would have a free hand to select a caretaker premier, providing the current one could be persuaded to resign straightaway.

The first opportunity for Liberals to put forward that possibility arises Friday, when the government caucus is scheduled to meet in Vancouver. Campbell is expected to attend, so they can tell him to his face. Presuming any of them, so bold in their talk when not in earshot of the boss, have the temerity to do so.