

Human rights group angered by gov't changes to commission

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A human rights group expressed alarm Monday over the province's refusal to extend the appointment of two activists to the Human Rights Commission of Alberta.

"This is but another example of the government's lack of commitment to the human rights commission and their obvious plan to downgrade its significance," said Senator Ron Ghitter, who heads the Alberta-based Dignity Foundation.

The province recently announced it won't renew the terms of Raffath Sayeed, a Lloydminster doctor, and Shirish Chotalia, an Edmonton human rights lawyer.

Another commissioner, Ron Scrimshaw, had his term extended for only four months. Delio Iannucci, a longtime Tory and member of

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a Calgary constituency board, was reappointed for four years.

Sayeed, who was acting chief commissioner after Fil Fraser's term ended last year, was replaced by Jack O'Neill, a former government deputy minister.

Chotalia expressed concern and disappointment over government's move.

"Essentially, all women and members of visible minorities have been removed from the commission now, and we're watching an appointment process that's just another

political game," she said.

"It appears that government is undermining the commission and the round tables are just cosmetic."

Ghitter worried government has removed knowledgeable commissioners with "activist reputations."

"Will the new members appointed by the government be individuals who have a strong commitment to human rights in the province of Alberta, or merely safe appointments for the government?" asked Ghitter.

Chotalia echoed Ghitter's concern. "The government feels it owns the human rights commission, and its credibility will be eroded eventually if appointments continue to be ministerial and cabinet decisions, just political decisions."

Tory backbenchers have suggested dismantling the commission to save money. Community Development Minister Gary Mar hasn't dismissed the idea, although he personally supports the commission.