

Ex-commissioners blast rights policy

Klein's revolving-door policy criticized

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Three former commissioners say the provincial government is chopping the Alberta Human Rights Commission off at the knees.

The decision not to renew the contract of chief commissioner Jack O'Neill is nothing new, says Shirish Chotalia, an Edmonton human rights lawyer and former commission member.

"This has been a pattern since Fil Fraser," Chotalia said Thursday.

Fraser, the last chief commissioner who spoke in favor of strengthened human rights, was out of a job two years ago when his contract expired. He was followed by interim chief Dr. Raf Sayeed, whose contract wasn't renewed 18 months ago.

The loss of O'Neill, whose 18-month appointment ends this weekend, is the latest attempt to cut the commission's strength, Chotalia said.

O'Neill released a report in June urging the government to strengthen human rights and protect the rights of homosexuals. Right-wing Conservative MLAs openly criticized it.

Fraser said O'Neill's exit mirrors his own.

"This is history repeating itself. This is one of a series of serious setbacks."

From seven members in the past, the commission is down to two commissioners plus the chief and operates on a \$1.5-million budget, Fraser said.

"It's understaffed, underfunded and we spend less on human rights per capita in Alberta than any other jurisdiction."

"The battle now is to hang on to what we have."

The sheer size of the backlog of complaints "makes it easier for people in Alberta to deny rights to minorities, gays and lesbians and women."

Alberta spends 65 cents per capita on human rights, about half the average for other provinces. A lobby from within the Tory caucus has been clamoring to cut the commission's budget further or eliminate it altogether.

"I'm sure that in due time, there will be a permanent commissioner and the search will go on," said Premier Ralph Klein.

Asked if his government is

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—Fil Fraser, former human rights commissioner

seeking a commissioner who fits its political views, he said: "I don't think that that's fair."

But Sayeed sees no secret in the reason why he wasn't kept on.

"It had to do with (former Community Development Minister Dianne) Mirosh not agreeing with the stand on gay rights that I took."

Sayeed views the six-month appointment of Charlach Mackintosh as acting chief commissioner as a sign the government is undecided about what to do with the commission — even after spending 18 months engaged in a public review.

Jonathan Murphy, head of the Edmonton Social Planning Council, said the revolving door at the top signals the government's intent to kill the commission. "They're going to get rid of all the human rights commissioners until they get one that doesn't believe in human rights."

Mackintosh said he considers himself an advocate for human rights and expects salary equality for women and rights for homosexuals to be two tough issues he'll face. "I'm not daunted by it in the least."

Fraser said his appointment shows Klein's promised arms-length appointment process hasn't materialized. O'Neill was an inside appointment, a former deputy minister of culture under Mirosh, picked after the government rejected all three finalists chosen in an extensive search for a new commissioner.

Chotalia said the commission's history since Klein took power doesn't bode well for the future.

"They didn't reappoint Elaine Skoreyko, who won a human rights award."

Other well-qualified individuals concerned with human rights have applied for commission posts but were turned down, Chotalia said. They include civil libertarian Brian Edy and former University of Alberta professor Olive Dickason, who took her battle for the right to work beyond retirement age to the Supreme Court of Canada.

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