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Public review for rights commission

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Public hearings will help decide the fate of the Alberta Human Rights Commission by June.

Five people — including an election campaign fund-raiser for Community Development Minister Gary Mar — were appointed Thursday to a public review panel for the Alberta Human Rights Commission.

Chief commissioner Jack O'Neill said the commission is not on the way to the scrap heap. But two former commissioners are concerned that the government is not committed to keep the commission, which was established in 1972 to protect Albertans from discrimination.

O'Neill, who chairs the review committee, said: "I would not be involved in this if I thought there was any intention on the part of the government to abolish the commission."

"It's possible that some of the MLAs might make a suggestion to that effect. But I would hope that

the report itself, signifying the high regard in which people hold our human rights commission, will impress the doubters."

So far, the committee has about 300 written submissions, the majority supporting the continued existence of the commission. O'Neill said.

But former commissioner Shirish Chotalia feels that "the government's agenda seems to be that of undermining the commission, and I really wonder whether they'll ever act on any recommendations to improve it."

Raffath Sayeed, former acting chief commissioner, echoed Chotalia's concerns.

"Frankly, I think the human rights commission is far from safe, but I like to be positive and just hope the review is open and increases awareness of the commission's importance," he said.

Controversy has swirled around the commission since Dianne Mirosh, the former minister responsible for human rights, first suggested axing the body to save money. Several backbenchers have echoed her suggestion.

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Last January, Mirosh said government could save \$1.6 million a year by abolishing the commission and transferring its responsibilities to other departments.

Premier Ralph Klein later said he stood by the commission, but in the wake of Mirosh's comments, the government launched the public review of the body and its governing legislation — the Individual's Rights Protection Act — last March.

Commissioners have since been participating in the review, which has consisted of workshops, group meetings and written submissions, but five people are now added to their ranks to conduct the final phase of the review — public hearings and a compilation of recommendations.

The panel is expected to make its report in early June.

O'Neill said many submissions call for the human rights commission to become independent from the government and to aggressively advocate human rights.

"Some of the complaints we have are against the government, itself, and it seems to be unwise, many people think, that a government agency should be handling a claim against the government, itself," O'Neill said.

Mar, who now has responsibility for the commission, maintained this fall he personally supports its mandate and the way the commission operates now.

In Thursday's release, Mar said he's confident the panel "will ensure the views of as many Albertans as possible are taken into consideration on this important topic."

But Chotalia said the true test of the government's commitment to the commission will come when it's

asked to act on panel recommendations.

"It's no secret the review was launched after Mrs. Mirosh said the commission should be abolished," Chotalia noted. "Maybe a review seemed politically appropriate then."

The five new panelists are: Jean Forest, former U of A chancellor and former human rights commissioner; Roy Louis, former president of the Indian Association of Alberta; Ross Watson, manager of William Watson Lodge in Kananaskis Provincial Park; Amal Umar, member of the Alberta Advisory Council on Women's Issues; and James Casey, an Edmonton employment lawyer and panelist at a commission sexual harassment symposium.

Casey's appointment raised some eyebrows. A source confirmed Casey sent fund-raising letters on Mar's behalf during his provincial election campaign.

Kelley Charlesbois, Mar's executive assistant, said he was unaware of Casey's campaign activities.

"But I do know Mr. Casey and Mr. Mar were classmates in university."

Charlesbois defended Casey's appointment, saying the lawyer "made a strong showing as part of a panel on sexual harassment. He also has an interest in human rights law."

Casey couldn't be reached for comment.