

It doesn't look good

When Alberta's new Tories came to power earlier this year they sent former community development minister Diane Mirosh on a search and destroy mission that now seems to include shaking up and perhaps shutting down the provincial Human Rights Commission.

The agency has survived. However, it is not intact. It doesn't take much investigation to conclude that the commission's days are numbered. If not shut down altogether it seems almost certain to be blended into other "soft" government functions, resented by hard bottom-liners, and left to die slowly of neglect.

This week, Gary Mar, Mirosh's successor, announced the contracts of the commission's two remaining minority members would not be renewed. Shirish Chotalia, an Edmonton lawyer and human rights specialist, and Dr. Raffath Sayeed of Lloydminster, learned of their curt dismissal the same way other Albertans did — from news reports.

Chotalia was forced to call Mar on a radio phone-in show in Calgary in her attempt to get an explanation. Her efforts to contact the minister through his office at the Alberta legislature had brought no response.

Over the radio, Mar told the fired commissioner — and everyone else listening — that she could submit a new application for the position which, apparently, will be opened to competition. The minister didn't say so, but the underlying message of his cool reply could only be the standard "don't call us we'll call you." In other words, forget it.

The government's callous and gratuitous discourtesy to people who have served the province with honor and distinction can be dismissed as simple ineptness.

But the government's seeming hostility to the commission and its mandate cannot be so easily ignored. It displays an unacceptable disregard for the problems of human rights faced by various groups including racial minorities in Alberta.

Human rights, after all, is a field where symbols, gestures and attitudes often speak louder than actions.

It's an area where a display of sensitivity or respect can mean more than perfunctory adherence to a legal document.

That's why it's so unfortunate that the provincial government has adopted such a negative attitude toward what ought to be (and was under Peter Lougheed) a key component of the Alberta government's public image.

It doesn't look good on them.

from Elaine !!

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