

Martha's Monthly July 2008

Letting the Dog Walk Himself: Pay Increases for the Premier and his Cabinet.

Last month some funny things happened in Alberta but two things made her laugh out loud. The first was the sight of a dog walking himself. It was a warm June afternoon when Martha spotted a dog holding the handle of his leash in his own mouth. The owners walked well behind the dog. (Martha thought the dog must be very well trained to be so self-controlled, but she noted there was nothing nearby to test that self-control!)

The second thing that struck Martha as funny was the sight of Alberta Cabinet Ministers voting themselves a 30% pay increase. The Premier and his Ministers can do such things without any debate or public knowledge as an "Order in Council" which is not unlike a neighborhood club of children coming up with a secret code word to get in the hideout. Except the Premier and Cabinet Ministers hold the power to make quite a few expensive decisions in their secret hideout.

It is not the amount of the increases that made Martha laugh (though one blogger pointed out the Premier's pay increase of \$54,000/year was more than most people earn in a year). Instead it was the fact that there was no open process and no arms-length decision maker to review the Ministers' pay. It seemed that the Premier and his Cabinet were walking themselves and, lacking self-control, had not avoided temptation!

Long time readers of Martha's monthly missives will know that Alberta is almost always the odd one out when it comes to laws, processes, and accountability. So you will not be surprised to learn that in almost every other province and territory the decision about the pay of the Cabinet Ministers is not left up to the Cabinet Ministers themselves. In fact, most have a committee made up of people who will NOT get the pay increase. Sometimes the committee is average people, sometimes it is a group of lawyers, but it is never a committee of Cabinet Ministers. Except in Alberta.

Now, lest you fear that the pay increases were to adjust for the notoriously high inflation in Alberta right now, Martha must remind you that every April 1 all Albertan MLAs have their pay increase by the Average Weekly Earnings for the previous year, as provided by Statistics Canada. In April that gave every MLA a 4.7% increase in [their wages](#). (This was very much in line with other group's wage increases – just two days earlier some members of the Alberta Union of Public Employees negotiated a 4.75% increase in their wages (see [AUPE](#)))

The BC Independent Commission to Review MLA Compensation compared not only the amounts that MLAs across the country make but also the process by which the amount is determined. Here is their [research](#) so that Premier Stelmach can easily determine: a) he is

the highest paid Premier in the country, and b) his is the only Cabinet that can walk itself and set its own wages.

In every province and territory (except Alberta) there is an understanding that MLA compensation decisions must be made by people who do not stand to gain by the decision and must not be done in secret clubhouses.

There was a mild uproar in Alberta last month after the wages amounts were made public but it was largely about the amount of the increase (Scott Hennig of the Canadian Taxpayer's Federation (CTF) led that fight). Stelmach's argument back to the CTF was that in order to attract people into politics you need to compete with private sector wages. Martha giggled as she counted the 407 candidates for public office in the March 2008 Alberta Election. Those 407 knew the wages. Was Premier Stelmach concerned about the quality of the people who would run for those wages? Stelmach might just be dissatisfied with the quality of the 23 Cabinet Ministers he chose or the pool from which he had to choose from!

Either way, things seem a little funny in Alberta right now. While dogs may well be able to hold their own leashes for a little while, the temptation to chase after a cat will soon overwhelm all their self-control. And so it is with Cabinet Ministers. If Cabinet Ministers are allowed to make the decisions about their wages, then the increases should not kick in until after the next election. Better still, an arms-length public commission should be struck in order to evaluate compensation for all Cabinet Ministers and the Premier so that "cats" will not tempt the "dogs".

Please write to Premier Stelmach; Kevin Taft, the Leader of the Official Opposition, and Brian Mason, the Leader of the New Democrats to let them know what you think. You can use our letter below and add your own thoughts or write your own letter. Just remember to [send it soon and send us a copy](#). (The link should open your email program will addresses included; simply copy and paste the following letter, along with your own thoughts, into your email message).

Send to premier@gov.ab.ca, edmonton.riverview@assembly.ab.ca, edmonton.highlandsnorwood@assembly.ab.ca, marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca

July 8, 2008

Dear Premier Stelmach

Last month's Order in Council that granted you and the 23 members of your Cabinet huge wage increases was an illegitimate process. I am not particularly concerned about

the amount of money or the reasons you argued your wages should increase. Frankly, the process is flawed. Anytime a group can arbitrarily increase their own wages without being held publicly accountable for the increase, there is a problem. In this case, the fact that you are members of the Alberta government and the direct beneficiaries of the increases makes the whole process ridiculous.

British Columbia and Saskatchewan have both studied the process by which elected members should have their wages increased. I wish to see Alberta adopt one of the models used in other provinces to ensure that a public committee or other arms-length organization decides upon future increases.

In the meantime it seems only fitting that you and your Cabinet make a public statement regretting your Order in Council and rescind the wage increases. Turn the whole matter over to a public commission in order to appear as though you are acting as a truly open and transparent Premier, as you promised.

Sincerely,

Your name and Address

CC Kevin Taft
Brian Mason
Martha's Monthly (www.marthasmonthly.ca)