

Alberta Speaker, Alliance MP spar over political endorsement; [Final Edition]

Norm Ovenden, Journal Ottawa Bureau. [Edmonton Journal](#). Edmonton, Alta.: [Apr 11, 2001](#). pg. A.7

Alberta Speaker Ken Kowalski is supposed to be a neutral political referee, but during last month's provincial election he showed a partisan edge in his dealings with Alliance MP David Chatters.

Although the two veteran northern Alberta politicians are back on friendly terms, it was a far different story midway through the campaign when they angrily traded names and insults after Chatters endorsed a rival Social Credit candidate in Kowalski's Barrhead-Westlock riding.

News of the spat became public only after Jeff Willerton, the second-place Socred candidate, aired the dirty laundry in a recent vitriolic letter to the Barrhead Leader.

"Ken Kowalski phoned Dave in Ottawa and threatened him with the release of a ... letter referring to Dave as a turncoat ... unless he withdrew his endorsement," Willerton wrote.

Willerton may have limited his chances in the next election by calling the voters "political whores" for electing Kowalski. Willerton finished 5,500 votes behind in the March 12 vote.

Kowalski wouldn't respond Tuesday to the charges "because he's the Speaker," said an aide. Kowalski was acclaimed Monday for his second term as Speaker. He has won seven straight elections for the Conservatives and at one point was the province's deputy premier.

Chatters said it went too far to say there were threats flying back and forth, preferring to put the dispute in more diplomatic terms. But he confirmed he received an angry phone call.

"Ken had suggested that if I was going to publicly endorse and publicly back Jeff, that he was suggesting he would send a letter to the paper suggesting that I was not true to my roots.

"So I suggested to Ken that if he did that, then I would take my break week (March 5 to 12) and publicly campaign for Jeff and go door to door with him. So Ken agreed not to publish the letter and I agreed not to campaign with Jeff. That was the end of it."

First elected for Reform in 1993, Chatters has known Kowalski for more than a quarter century and had served on the former Alberta cabinet minister's constituency board of directors.

But the Athabasca MP wasn't a fan of Premier Ralph Klein and didn't like the way the Conservative government had handled health care matters or the deregulation of electricity.

"I didn't know how to voice my concerns other than through the ballot box.

"That's every citizen's right, but Ken was upset that I wasn't supporting him."

What particularly bugged Kowalski was that he had backed the formation of the Canadian Alliance last spring and abandoned the federal Tories.

"He felt somehow that I owed him some loyalty for that and I should have stayed with him," Chatters said.

"He felt betrayed. He was angry and upset and said things that shouldn't have been said. I don't think it's an issue that ever should have been for public consumption, but Jeff fixed that."

These types of blow-ups happen all the time in the heat of campaigns and are quickly forgotten, the MP added.

What the public won't forget, however, is a candidate who not only doesn't lose gracefully, but insults the electorate at the same time. It was no disgrace to lose to a "giant" like Kowalski, Chatters added.

"I was a little taken back by Jeff's accusations. That was kind of foolish because in politics you live to rise again. I don't think his remarks help his chances of doing that."

Willerton has conceded the letter was "somewhat infamous," but denied he was a sore loser.