

MLA backing can make or break leader;; [Early Edition] Caucus support can translate into votes from individual ridings

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EDMONTON - With a cadre of 34 MLAs on his side, Jim Dinning would appear to be running away with the Progressive Conservative leadership race.

After all, Ed Stelmach, the only other candidate to have mustered much caucus support, has just seven MLAs in his camp, and others, such as Dave Hancock, have none.

But in a one-member, one-vote system, what are MLAs worth? Other than providing photo ops, do they really help in a race that will be won by selling memberships and mobilizing supporters?

The answer is yes, says Rick Orman, the former energy minister who finished third behind Ralph Klein and Nancy Betkowski in the 1992 leadership vote.

Klein had 32 of the 59 Tory caucus members on his team. Orman says he underestimated the importance of his colleagues' support.

"In the last leadership race, it was absolutely crucial," says Orman, who now supports Dinning.

"Generally, in the ridings, people are loyal to their local MLA, and if their MLA is already with a candidate, people put a lot of stock in that."

Orman says MLA support was particularly important in rural areas, where voters have farther to travel to the polls.

There is no guarantee people who buy memberships will vote, and a strong team on the ground is vital to herd members to the ballot box.

Even with his band of MLAs, Klein still lost the first ballot. On the second ballot, however, kingmakers helped Klein win rural Alberta by an eye-popping 11,262 votes.

In Drumheller, Shirley McClellan helped him pull 1,053 votes, compared to Betkowski's 142. In Barrhead, Ken Kowalski's support brought Klein 714 votes to Betkowski's 177.

While most admit they would prefer to have their colleagues onside, the other candidates downplay the importance of MLA support.

"Because it's one membership, one vote, many Albertans, especially new Albertans, are looking at not necessarily the MLA directing them to vote a particular way," says Stelmach.

"They're assessing the qualities and the values a candidate has ... and making their decision."

Ted Morton has the strange distinction of being the only candidate endorsed by a member of another party. Alberta Alliance Leader Paul Hinman supports Morton, but says he will not vote on Nov. 25 and has failed to convince his party's board to send letters to its members urging them to vote for Morton.

If party members feel strongly about a candidate, recent experience suggests MLAs aren't enough to stop the wave. In March, for example, public support from the entire Tory caucus wasn't enough to keep Klein from receiving a disastrously low 55-per-cent approval from party members at their convention.

There are still a few undecided MLAs out there, some of whom have formed their own group. The loosely defined band calls itself the C5, which stands for "Conservative, Competitive, Caring, Conservationist Coalition."

Environment Minister Guy Boutilier says he was driving back from the PC convention with Tory whip Mel Knight when they started to talk about forming a coalition to help evaluate the leadership candidates based on the needs of their northern Alberta constituencies.

There are about a dozen MLAs in the group who have not committed to any candidate yet, Boutilier says, including Clint Dunford, Ty Lund, Pearl Calahasen, Ivan Strang and LeRoy Johnson. Leadership candidate Victor Doerksen also was part of the group before he entered the race.

"We kicked him out," Boutilier jokes. "We thought he was biased."

The group interviewed seven of the leadership candidates about a month and a half ago and are planning to interview Gary McPherson and Doerksen in the coming weeks.

"We may come forward and vote as a bloc or we may come forward and vote in two or three camps," says Boutilier, who even designed letterhead for the C5 one night on his home computer.

Some of Boutilier's group may eventually back Oberg, who claims to have the support of about a half dozen MLAs. Sean Libin, a spokesman for Oberg, says the names are being withheld for strategic purposes.

No matter who the C5 end up supporting, the campaign has so many variables and so much time left before the vote, few are willing to make predictions about the outcome, no matter what the MLA numbers suggest.

As Orman says: "I don't think Jim or anybody else thinks this is over."

amclean@thejournal.canwest.com