

"The quiet but persistent talk about who will get Klein's job continues."



For months, Premier Ralph Klein has said repeatedly that he isn't going anywhere. No matter what his friends say and no matter who wants

the job, he'll stay until he decides to retire—no one will push him out. Which leads to a political game not unlike the one being played out in Ottawa.

Premier Klein seems bored and his government unfocused at a critical period in the province's history. Klein's supporters were the first to notice—and turn on him. The always friendly *Calgary Sun* started to take shots. In July 2002, columnist Paul Jackson wrote that Klein has been around too long, is out of touch and survives only because the opposition is fragmented. Then *Edmonton Sun* columnist Neil Waugh, another one-time friend, started in on Klein and hasn't stopped.

Ted Byfield writes Klein off as a status quo leader. The real cut came when long-time Klein friend Art Smith told *Calgary Herald* columnist Don Martin this spring that the Premier should think about retiring.

Five years ago, such talk was sacrilege. Today, it is commonplace.

But Klein isn't listening. Like Jean Chrétien in Ottawa, he will go when he decides to go, and not before.

Aspiring premiers—Klein calls them "tire-kickers"—will have to wait, especially the suspected tire-kickers still working for him. As early as December 2001, he warned: "I know who they are and I'm not going to mention names—but forget it." He told the Conservative convention in March 2002 that he is staying. He's still singing that tune. However, no one knows better than he that a quiet campaign can be run right under the leader's nose. He did it himself as environment minister 15 years ago.

Klein was the most visible minister in Don Getty's cabinet, travelling the province—to clean up the environment, of course.

The quiet but persistent talk about who will get Klein's job continues. Four names are mentioned: former Treasurer Jim Dinning, now a senior vice-president at TransAlta Corporation in Calgary; Health Minister Gary Mar; Justice Minister David Hancock; and Economic Development Minister Mark Norris.



Klein clearly hears the talk. Gary Mar's head was on the block first. Whether Mar was fantasizing about the premier's office a few years ago is not known for certain, but the *Edmonton Journal* certainly made it look as if he was. Scant weeks after Klein warned off the tire-kickers in December 2001, the *Journal* published a huge two-page spread on January 20, 2002, entitled "Minister's healthy ambition: The man who would be king?" Mar didn't write the story or the headline, but that didn't matter—the trail of blood started in the Premier's office and ran all the way back to Mar's office. The entire cabinet noticed. If Norris and Hancock had thoughts of leadership, they abruptly disappeared. Three down; one to go.

Dinning is a different story. He's in the private sector and considered beyond the Premier's reach. Dinning can do what he wants. He's a smart

guy—smart enough to admit that while he wants the job, he should keep his head down.

Dinning is Alberta's Paul Martin. He was a principal architect of the government restructuring in the first Klein government in 1993. While working with Nancy Betkowski's leadership team in 1992, he helped draft "200 Days of Change," an ambitious plan to overhaul government. As Ralph Klein's treasurer, Dinning implemented key elements of Betkowski's plan, the same plan that Klein's team vigorously criticized during the campaign.

Dinning gets around. He's visible and invisible. He takes speaking engagements carefully—business groups, think tanks—and he shows up in rural ridings occasionally. But not often enough to be criticized for undercutting Klein.

His public statements are crafted carefully to suggest that he has new ideas while avoiding direct criticism. Try this one, to the C. D. Howe Institute in June 2001: "If I had my druthers, the next agenda would be an agenda for change to shake things up—where government becomes an agitator for change, refusing to become complacent or accept the status quo..."

They've never had a warm relationship. At public functions, they're civil. And while time is Klein's only weapon against Dinning, it may be enough. Some say the reason Klein insists on staying is because for every day he lingers, Dinning looks older and more out of touch. Klein can simply wait him out.

In the end, the Premier has the upper hand after all. No matter what his friends say, the media speculates, or aspiring premiers do, Klein will go when he wants to.

Rich Vivone is the publisher and editor of *Insight into Government*.