

# Power-line rally offered glimpse of next election

## Stelmach should have sent stand-in

BY GRAHAM THOMSON, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM AUGUST 28, 2010

When organizers of a rally last Wednesday night in Vegreville sent an invitation to Premier Ed Stelmach, they should have included a blindfold and cigarette. And perhaps a bull's-eye to wear over his heart.

This was the political equivalent of a firing squad.

On the one side were 500 people upset over proposed transmission lines. On the other were the three major opposition party leaders, including the Wildrose Alliance's Danielle Smith.

Stelmach would have been in the middle, getting shot at from both sides.

It's no wonder he declined the invitation. But, even so, he didn't escape unscathed. His reputation has taken a bit of a beating; Vegreville, after all, is his home riding.

"I just hoped Ed was here to at least say something," local businessman Walter Gegolick said after the meeting. "A lot of the people who are here today are big supporters of Ed. This is his constituency, and I'm just afraid they might have a sour taste in their mouths over this whole thing."

Gegolick emphasized he's a supporter, friend even, of Stelmach and he intends to stay that way -- but he was puzzled why "Ed" didn't show up to talk to his own constituents, the people who elected him with an almost 80-per-cent landslide last election.

"I will write Ed," said Gegolick. "I've always got to listen to two sides of the story before I make a decision."

Gegolick's disappointment over Stelmach's absence was heartfelt and sincere -- and endearingly naive. To Gegolick, Stelmach is his local MLA, capable and admired, who happens to be premier and who should have explained the government's position on transmission lines to Wednesday's rally.

As far as Gegolick is concerned, Stelmach had nothing to fear.

However, there isn't a chief of staff on the planet who would have sent a politician like Stelmach into that rally hall on Wednesday night, even if it is in the heart of Stelmach's home riding.

The reason Stelmach gave for not going was that as a landowner himself, he is in a conflict of interest.

The unspoken reason was that Stelmach -- almost four years after becoming premier -- continues to be an astonishingly bad public communicator. He'd have trouble selling water in the Sahara.

Not only that, Stelmach's handlers smelled a trap. The frontman for the rally was Shayne Saskiw, a former member of the Conservatives' provincial executive who loudly jumped to the Wildrose Alliance party in January. His name was on the rally flyers as the contact person, and he was the one making the calls to political leaders and news media. This had the whiff of an anti-government rally, and it seemed Saskiw had done everything to set a trap but dig a hole and cover it with leaves.

Saskiw denied the allegations and said he had just volunteered as a concerned citizen on an issue of public importance. Others on the organizing committee, insisting they are non-partisan, echoed Saskiw's comments but said afterwards Saskiw perhaps shouldn't have been the frontman.

If it's unfair to say the Wildrose hijacked the event, it might be fair to say the party, via Saskiw, manoeuvred the meeting into something of a trap. Unfair for Stelmach, perhaps, but as a political tactic, brilliant.

Stelmach seemed a loser no matter what he did: show up and be eviscerated by an opposition-led crowd; or stay home and be accused of undemocratic cowardice.

Not only did Saskiw manage to attract big city media and pack the hall with 500 angry or curious voters from all parties, he persuaded Liberal leader David Swann and New Democrat leader Brian Mason to come to the rally and join Wildrose leader Danielle Smith onstage, thus adding credibility to the event.

To dismiss the rally as simply a Wildrose stunt would be to undersell just how heated the debate over transmission lines has become, especially in rural areas.

"Some people here told me if Ed Stelmach had come, he would have been booed," said Trish Elliott from Sturgeon County. "I wouldn't have booed; I would have refrained from clapping, perhaps." Elliott is a Wildrose sympathizer, but the event also attracted New Democrat sympathizers such as local farmer Allan Yaniv, who came away impressed with Smith: "She's a powerful speaker."

Government officials quietly acknowledge in hindsight they should have sent someone in Stelmach's place. Deputy premier Doug Horner, perhaps -- smart, articulate, knows the issue and isn't as prickly as Energy Minister Ron Liepert, who would likely have created enough friction to set the hall on fire. Anybody but the empty chair that greeted the audience on Wednesday.

Without someone arguing that the province desperately needs new transmission lines, the meeting became an unopposed two-hour argument that government is out to expropriate land, undermine property rights and charge electricity consumers \$16 billion -- all with the aim of exporting power to the United States.

Stelmach supporter Walter Gegolick found the meeting "very one-sided," but he also left with the impression the government hasn't been honest with landowners: "Maybe Ed and his government should let us know a little more what is going on. Is it for export?"