

Tory hopefuls urged to fight sale of AltaLink

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The men running to become the next Progressive Conservative leader - and Alberta premier - say they are closely watching the proposed sale of AltaLink as the debate heats up over the planned purchase of the transmission company by Berkshire Hathaway.

ATCO recently took out full-page newspaper ads warning of "serious consequences" if AltaLink's current owner, Montreal-based SNC-Lavalin, is allowed to sell the company to the United States firm, which is owned by billionaire Warren Buffett.

The provincial NDP has already called for the \$3.2-billion deal - which must be approved by both the province's arm's-length Alberta Utilities Commission and the federal government - to be killed.

NDP MLA Dave Eggen wants the PC government and the Tory leadership candidates to call on federal industry minister James Moore to block the deal, saying it fails the net benefit test spelled out in legislation.

"I think the feds have the best opportunity," said the Edmonton-Calder MLA, one of two candidates seeking the provincial NDP leadership.

"I challenge the Conservative leadership candidates to make themselves heard on this. It's a multibilliondollar project but more than that, it's ... access and control of a public service."

Eggen said stopping the deal should be a prelude to returning the transmission lines to public control.

Foreign takeovers have been the subject of political battles in the past, with the most notable recent example being Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall's full-court press in 2010 to get Ottawa to block the sale of Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan to BHP Billiton.

AltaLink owns roughly 12,000 kilometres of transmission lines and 280 substations in the province. It provides electricity to the majority - about 85 per cent - of Albertans.

PC leadership candidate Thomas Lukaszuk said that given Alberta's reliance on export markets for energy and other resources, "we can't afford to be protectionist."

But the Edmonton-Castle Downs MLA said as premier he would want to sit down with the companies to determine whether the sale was in the best interests of Albertans.

"There is nothing wrong with a situation like this, when the deal is of this magnitude, to render an opinion," said the former deputy premier.

Former federal cabinet minister Jim Prentice noted the province has the ability to provide input to the federal review and "the two regulatory hurdles for this are extremely high."

But he told the Herald's editorial board last week that the province needs to look closely at the deal.

"It's clearly a significant transaction. It has major long-term implications for us in terms of who owns our infrastructure," Prentice said. "We need to be careful. We need to review it."

As the federal industry minister in 2008, Prentice blocked the sale of the space division of Macdonald Dettwiler and Associates to an American firm for national security reasons.

Calgary-Hays MLA Ric McIver said foreign investment is "very much a federal issue" but Alberta's interests must be paramount in Ottawa's review. "The province needs to take a hard look at this ... and if it has concerns to bring those concerns to the federal government," he said.

Both Wildrose Leader Danielle Smith and Liberal Leader Raj Sherman say they have concerns about the deal but aren't calling for it to be blocked at this point.

Premier Dave Hancock, who is serving on an interim basis until PC party members vote for a new leader in September, said it would be inappropriate for him to make any comment on the proposed sale.