

Labour fights back on union dues threat

Union rep says MP Duncan would be vulnerable if Tory MP's private member bill passes

By Peter O'Neil, Vancouver Sun September 8, 2012

One of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's veteran ministers will be a casualty if the Conservatives target the Canadian union movement, a B.C. labour leader warned Friday.

An Ottawa-area Tory MP, furious that a union representing federal employees endorsed separatists in the Quebec election, said this week he'll push for a new law allowing union members to opt out of paying union dues.

That threat triggered a terse response from union leaders, with Canadian Labour Congress President Ken Georgetti charging that the Conservatives are using the Quebec issue as an excuse to "silence" critics.

Indian Affairs Minister John Duncan, who has opposed efforts by caucus colleagues to weaken labour rights since entering Parliament as a Reform MP in 1993, represents one of B.C.'s more heavily unionized ridings, noted Darrel Wong, president of United Steelworkers local 1-1937, the former International Woodworkers of America union.

He said Duncan will almost certainly lose his Vancouver Island North seat if the Harper government goes along with Nepean-Carleton MP Pierre Poilievre's call for union dues legislation.

"(John Duncan) has managed to get elected in an area where there's a fairly strong union density, and so for him something like that would basically be the elimination of his opportunity to be an MP," Wong said in an interview.

"It's an issue felt very strongly by workers and by the labour movement."

Wong said Poilievre's proposal mimics legislative efforts in southern U.S. states to weaken and ultimately destroy unions.

Poilievre was responding to the disclosure that the Public Service Alliance of Canada, which has 172,000 members across Canada including 16,300 in B.C., issued a report card to Quebec members that concluded two separatist parties were the most union-friendly.

Duncan wasn't available for comment Thursday or Friday. His spokes-man, Jason MacDonald, issued a statement saying the government has no plans to bring in union dues legislation.

But MacDonald wouldn't say in a subsequent interview if the Harper cabinet would support or oppose an MP's private bill. Tory MPs have already endorsed a private bill from B.C. MP Russ Hiebert, now before the finance committee, that would impose stricter disclosure rules relating to how unions spend dues.

"We have no plans for government legislation; cabinet hasn't discussed such a thing," MacDonald said.

He added that the government believes it is "appalling" that PSAC endorsed separatist candidates.

Duncan, 63, is a former forester first elected in the 1993 election that saw the Reform party replace the New Democratic Party as the vehicle for populist protest voters in B.C.

He has won his riding over the NDP by narrow margins in 2004, 2008 and 2011, but was out of elected politics from 2006-08 when the riding was held by the New Democrats.

At Reform's 1994 policy convention, Duncan and several Reform colleagues worked together to defeat an anti-union resolution, and in 2000 complained publicly when the Canadian Alliance party - which was created to replace Reform, and three years later became part of the new Conservative party - passed a similar resolution.

"It really worries me. It sends a signal that we want to interfere with the collective bargaining process and we don't," Duncan said at the time. "To me it's a bad signal."

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