

Conservatives reject nomination bid by former Sask. premier Grant Devine

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REGINA (CP) - Grant Devine, the former Saskatchewan premier who led the province during one of the biggest corruption scandals in modern Canadian politics, blames the Liberal sponsorship controversy for ending his hopes of running in the next federal election.

Devine said he was shocked that the Conservative Party of Canada rejected his nomination application. He believes the party wants to appear "pure" in light of the scandal that has rocked the Liberal government in Ottawa. "My constituents are just sickened," Devine said in a telephone interview. "People just can't believe it, across the province and across the country. It's unbelievable."

Devine had been seeking the Conservative nomination in the riding of Souris-Moose Mountain, but on Thursday the party said it doesn't want him as a candidate.

Devine said the head of the national nominating committee phoned him in morning and informed him he could not run, but he wasn't given any reasons.

He has his suspicions though.

The Conservatives have been hammering away at Prime Minister Paul Martin and his Liberal government since it came to light that \$100 million in public money was paid to Liberal-friendly communications firms in Quebec who did little or no work.

"They are going after Mr. Martin really hard on this sponsorship scandal," Devine said.

"While they are doing that they don't want to be associated with any other past governments of any kind, in particular the Progressive Conservative government of Grant Devine."

Party president Don Plett did not deny that the Conservatives want to distance themselves from any sort of scandal, but he would not cite that as a reason why Devine was blocked.

"We certainly want our party to be pure," Plett said. "As to the specifics of why we did not approve his candidacy, that will remain an internal party matter."

Devine and his provincial Tories governed Saskatchewan from 1982 to 1991.

In the years that followed, 14 Conservative members of the legislature and two caucus workers were convicted of fraud and breach of trust, which occurred between 1987 and 1991. They illegally diverted hundreds of thousands of dollars from government allowances in a phoney expense-claim scam.

The scandal happened on Devine's watch, but he was never linked to it nor was he ever charged.

But when he announced last month that he wanted to run for the Conservatives nationally, questions about his track record arose immediately.

Devine said the party's decision was particularly tough to swallow, considering he was encouraged to run for the nomination by several high-profile members, including former Tory leader Peter MacKay.

MacKay spoke out in Devine's defence on Thursday, saying he was disappointed by the party's decision.

"I find it troubling when there is an interference in the democratic process," MacKay said.

"A nomination process - except in extraordinary circumstances, except when there is exceptional reason to intervene - should be left to that particular constituency."

The president of the riding association has also come out on Devine's side.

Ken Sutherland said the association has scheduled an emergency meeting for Friday to try and delay the nomination vote until after the Conservative leadership convention in March.

Then the new leader could make the decision on Devine.

"I am very upset over it," Sutherland said. "Basically, I believe in the power of the ballot, not the power of a faceless bureaucrat."

One of the challengers for the nomination, Ed Komarnicki, said he would have preferred to have delegates in the constituency decide whether

Devine should run or not.

"It's something that should have been decided locally," Komarnicki said.

"We have been in the membership sales and, by my records and information, we have outsold him and we are confident we can win on the ground and would have won on the ground.

"That is the way we would have preferred it."

MP Roy Bailey currently represents the riding. He won it under the Canadian Alliance banner but is not seeking re-election.

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