



Thu, February 20, 2003

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Photo of the Day



Dion sends Klein letter to 'dismiss' Alberta separatism 'misunderstanding'

By BRUCE CHEADLE

OTTAWA (CP) - Alberta Premier Ralph Klein is "a great Canadian," says the federal intergovernmental affairs minister, which is why Stephane Dion says he needs to clear up a misunderstanding over fresh talk of Alberta separatism.

"I think there is misunderstanding about what he said," Dion told reporters outside the Commons on Thursday. "I am sending a letter to be sure that we will dismiss it." Fringe parties have advocated western separatism for years, but the issue flared to life earlier this week with a line in the Alberta government's throne speech asserting that the province's ability to be a partner in Canada is compromised by the federal government.

Klein did little to douse the flames when he acknowledged a debate about separatism will come up at the provincial Conservative party's annual meeting next month.

He said the strained relationship between the federal government and Alberta was raised in the province's throne speech because "pursuing Alberta's interests in Ottawa . . . is a priority for the (provincial) government in 2003."

The premier stressed that Albertans are Canadians and want to remain Canadians.

"I don't want to offend Mr. Dion. I think he has done a very good job in calming the waters relative to the Quebec issue . . . but perhaps he has been so consumed with that issue that he has failed to take notice about what is happening in Alberta, relative to the Kyoto protocol and our concerns," Klein said Thursday.

Klein got some unusual federal backing from Health Minister Anne McLellan, the MP for Edmonton-West.

"My premier did not talk about separation - I just want to make that absolutely plain," she said Thursday in an interview.

"I read the speech from the throne and what my premier asked for, on behalf of Albertans, was that the federal government treated Alberta with respect and listened to Albertans."

Dion was brought into the federal cabinet by Prime Minister Jean Chretien to combat Quebec separatists and has engaged in frequent, scholarly polemics with the Parti Quebecois government.

He said he would be sending Klein "a very polite, very respectful" letter.

"I'm sure he is not a separatist," said Dion. "I will send a letter to him to be sure there is no misunderstanding about this aspect."

Canadian Alliance Leader Stephen Harper sounded rather less forgiving of Klein's musings.

"I don't think it's useful," said the Calgary MP.

Harper said Albertans would be better served by flexing their economic and provincial powers and by voting for the Alliance to advocate their agenda in Ottawa.

"Those are the two useful things that can be done," said Harper. "I don't think idle threats about separation serve any purpose."

As for Dion's letter seeking clarification, Harper was dismissive.

"I think we've had enough of Mr. Dion's letter-writing. He might want to sit down with the government of Alberta and see what their concerns actually are."

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