

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## Ministerial eyes on leadership prize, with duties going to the dogs

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Victoria -- Kevin Acton has a spot for B.C.'s next prison, at a near- empty industrial park in Lumby. John Harwood hopes to beat that, offering an abandoned prison near Clearwater that just needs a fresh coat of paint.

That the mayors of the two Okanagan communities are actually fighting for the right to host the province's next prison might surprise Burnaby residents who mounted a large and noisy protest to stop construction of a jail in their own backyard. The Burnaby residents forced the B.C. Liberal government to retreat in a bid to save the party's area MLAs in last year's election.

Now Solicitor-General Rich Coleman is faced with a happy dilemma of where to plant a new corrections facility.

It's just one of the urgent decisions pressing on the B.C. government. And it is one more thing that could get pushed to the backburner while the B.C. Liberal Party hunts for a replacement for Premier Gordon Campbell.

The government knows it needs to get building. The union representing prison guards warns they are sitting on a powder keg. And the mayors are keen to get shovels in the ground.

But there couldn't be a worse time to try to get things done in government. It's not the paralysis of an election campaign - the grand old granite pile in Victoria is humming with activity. But much of that business in the legislature is consumed with the leadership question.

Mr. Coleman is considering whether he will run. (More likely, he's choosing the right time to announce.)

Mr. Campbell's announcement last week that he intends to step down came hard on the heels of a cabinet shuffle and a massive reorganization of government.

While new ministers sit in their ministry offices, swamped with briefings and deep in budget planning, there are probably half a dozen among them who are simultaneously crunching the numbers, lining up campaign teams and keeping a hand in the party machinations that will determine the rules for the leadership contest. Some will step aside if they run, leaving their unfinished business to others.

Mr. Coleman, who has been in his current portfolio for less than two weeks, hasn't yet met with the mayors who would offer him an answer to one of his big challenges.

Mr. Harwood, the mayor of Clearwater, said Mr. Coleman would meet with no setbacks in his town. The Bear Creek facility was built in the early 1980s as a minimum-security prison. It was shut down and sold to a private investor who is now happy to sell or lease the property back to government.

"The roof looks a little stained and it could use a coat of paint," Mr. Harwood said. But an online poll in his community showed 94-per-cent support for reopening the prison.

Lumby once prospered thanks to a vibrant forest industry that provided a swimming pool, curling rink, libraries and an arena. Now, with a population of just 1,657 people, the infrastructure is crumbling and there is no tax base to pay for needed repairs. Mr. Acton is promoting the prison as a solution.

"A prison makes a great corporate citizen, they offer good jobs with benefits, and they pay their taxes on time," he said.

Mr. Acton had planned to be in Victoria later this month to talk to senior government officials about why Lumby would be a better site for the prison. That meeting was cancelled due to the whirlwind of recent changes.

As frustrating as it is, he's getting used to it. He's met with the last two solicitors-general, and every time they get close, the nameplate changes on the office door. "Now someone's popped the damned balloon again," he said.

Mr. Coleman said he wants to find a new prison site in a "timely manner" and wants to avoid the firefight his government endured when it tried to open a facility in Burnaby. "We'd just like to go where we can build it and get it done," he said.

A solution might be at hand, if he has the time to pursue it.

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## WHY B.C. NEEDS JAILS

The Harper government's harsher sentencing laws mean more criminals behind bars.

BC Corrections is already in the midst of the largest capital investment in its history - it is building 304 cells across B.C. to hold more than 600 offenders. Still, it is not enough. The end of "two for one" credits for time served in pretrial alone is expected to add 271 more full-time prisoners to the province's roster.

Dean Purdy works in an overcrowded maximum-security prison near Victoria that serves an average of 375 prisoners in a facility built for 206 inmates - which he describes as "noisy and chaotic" at best, and dangerously violent at times.

"Prisons are bursting at the seams. We are dealing with more mental illness than ever, segregating gang members is tougher, and prisoners can't get into rehabilitation programs," he said. "It adds up to an unhealthy and unstable prison environment."

Justine Hunter

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