

Redford's drunk-driving bill runs into a few hiccups



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Premier Alison Redford's government suddenly threw its drunk-driving bill into neutral Friday, as opposition began to erupt even within her own caucus.

The PCs continued with closure to pass the bill. But Transportation Minister Ray Danyluk said measures against repeat offenders who blow .08 will be implemented first, with more controversial penalties for .05 drivers delayed until later.

Actual dates for any of this aren't known yet; but I'm betting no Albertan will have his car snatched for blowing .05 until well after the next election.

The resistance movement comes not just from Wildrose and the hospitality industry, but from some very upset PC MLAs.

Lloyd Snelgrove, the ex-finance minister who won't run again, was especially fierce Tuesday, telling me the bill is "terribly flawed in my opinion."

"With this bill, they're going to treat you as guilty before you even get to court,"

Snelgrove said.

"We can't even say God damn bank robbers are guilty before they get to court."

"I don't know what other crime there is where you're guilty before being proven guilty."

Asked if he felt government MLAs had a proper say in the bills, Snelgrove said, "I'm not so concerned about caucus not being properly informed, I'm concerned about the hospitality industry not being consulted and caucus not being told the facts."

Richard Marz, another MLA on the verge of retirement, had already told the legislature Monday evening that he wouldn't support the bill.

He said more than 90 per cent of his constituents in Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills are opposed. Marz doubts how effective the law will be at cutting deaths an injuries among drivers below .08. On Tuesday he voted against the bill in committee — an extremely rare action for a Tory.

Wildrose MLA Rob Anderson has claimed for days that "half the PC caucus" is opposed to the bill. When I asked Snelgrove if that was accurate, he said "well, even a blind squirrel finds an acorn once in a while."

There's no doubt caucus discontent is widespread

both with the bill and its abrupt arrival on the scene.

MLAs who used to complain bitterly about not being consulted by premier Ed Stelmach found the same thing happening again.

In an effort to get the bill through by Christmas as a showpiece for the next election,

the government didn't consult Albertans, the hospitality industry or even the MLAs.

Among regular Albertans, the main opposition is clearly strongest in rural and small-town areas.

Snelgrove said that in his northeast Alberta riding the bill will "absolutely" hurt the government in the next election.

"I've had seniors coming by my (Vermilion) office and they are afraid of what we are going to do with them, not understanding if they can have one drink or more."

On Tuesday, both Wildrose MLA Guy Boutiller and Alberta Party member

Dave Taylor called for Redford to table the bill rather than pushing it through closure.

Redford refused, but suddenly alluded to an extensive period of education on the .05 portion.

That's the section that would see drivers lose their licences and cars for three days after a first offence. Penalties escalate sharply for subsequent offences, even for drivers who don't reach the Criminal Code standard for impaired driving.

Wildrose has been blasting the .05 provisions, while hammering at the need for tougher penalties for drivers who blow .08.

Suddenly, the government shifted ground on Monday afternoon.

When PC MLA Dave Rodney asked Danyluk a series of setup questions, the minister said .08 measures (including instant loss of license until criminal cases go through) will be brought in first, with .05 coming later.

That will mollify some PCs, who, of course, will accord the legislation the usual thundering majority.

But then, they did that for Ed too. It does not always signify seasonal cheer.

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