

Angry e-mail brings down a B.C. minister

Bill Bennett forced to quit after exchange with Fernie constituent

Miro Cernetig

Vancouver Sun; with files from Larry Pynn and Nicholas Read

Wednesday, February 07, 2007

VICTORIA -- Like most cabinet ministers, Bill Bennett never went anywhere without his laptop and BlackBerry, the devices that let him send hundreds of instant e-mails day or night, to everyone from constituents to the premier himself.

But that easy access to e-mail spelled the minister of mines' downfall Tuesday when he lost his job after revelations that he had sent an insulting missive to a constituent he called "dumb" and possibly an "American spy."

"It was an unacceptable exchange, clearly," Premier Gordon Campbell said Tuesday after accepting Bennett's offer to resign. "I think e-mails should be answered in a way that's respectful of the opinions of the citizens that are involved.

Campbell said Bennett did a good job and showed integrity by stepping down. But the imbroglio also prompted the premier to offer advice to anyone else with a BlackBerry: "It's always better to sleep overnight over an e-mail or any letter you're angry at."

Bennett's downfall started a week ago as he sat in his hotel room at Vancouver's Bayshore hotel and found an e-mail from a constituent who ran the local gun club in Fernie, which is part of his rural constituency.

Bennett's blood boiled when Maarten Hart's missive accused him of favouring big-money game outfitters over ordinary hunters and saying the Liberal government "bows to the almighty dollar and faces east three time each day (not to Mecca, but to Wall Street.)"

Bennett started typing furiously, retorting with a blistering e-mail of his own.

He called Hart "dumb" for not knowing who his friends are, labelling him an "American spy" and saying: "Let me be very direct with you, as you were with me. It is my understanding that you are an American, so I don't give a shit what your opinion is on Canada."

Then Bennett, 56, pushed the send button. At the moment, in his hotel room, he didn't realize he had just deleted himself from the Liberal cabinet. But that conclusion didn't take long coming.

"You know the next morning, when I thought about what I had done, I probably



CREDIT: Glenn Baglo/Vancouver Sun file
Bill Bennett

knew then," said Bennett. "But I guess you hope against hope that maybe the guy [will] maybe cut me some slack. But he didn't. And I understand. My e-mail to him was very harsh. I told the premier [Monday] night, the first time I talked to him, I would be resigning."

A sheepish Bennett agreed with Campbell that fulminating in an e-mail was unbecoming of a minister. But he also went on to suggest that his rough-hewn beginnings in B.C.'s backcountry and his quick-fire temper may not be best suited to the easy accessibility of e-mail.

"You know, I didn't grow up in the city or anything like that. . . . I never finished high school," he said. "I was working fish camps when I was 17 years old. And I worked in them for many years. I've been in bar fights, I've been in knife fights."

"That's not my life any more but sometimes I can be a little too earthy," said Bennett, who in mid-life went on to get a law degree. "In the old days before e-mail I would have written that letter, looked at it in the morning and tossed it into the wastepaper basket . . . but I blew my cool and e-mail was too easy."

Anti-American sentiments are a guaranteed flashpoint in the Kootenays, where Bennett's riding is situated. It has been a favourite destination for Vietnam draft dodgers, many of whom became Canadians, and it will be hotly contested by the NDP and Liberals in the next election.

Hart -- who fired off an e-mail at 10:30 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 4 to complain about Bennett to the premier and New Democratic Party leader Carole James -- expressed no regrets that the minister's head had rolled.

"I don't think the sentiments expressed by Mr. Bennett about Americans are appropriate in any context, let alone directed to a landed immigrant such as myself, and certainly not for a man who is charged with representing sensitive mining and environmental negotiations with Americans," Hart said in an e-mail to The Sun.

"I believe that Mr. Bennett believes his position gives him the power to send e-mails such as he sent me, and I want him to know that this is not the case."

The NDP's James said Bennett did the right thing by resigning. But she also saw it as a sign of a larger flaw in the government's relationship with people it disagrees with.

"It's an attitude problem they need to fix," she said. "No question it's a reminder to everyone. You need to take time at the end of a long day, putting down e-mails . . . you need to think about what you're putting down."

mcernetig@png.canwest.com

EXCHANGE THAT BROUGHT DOWN A MINISTER

From: Maarten Hart

Sent: 19 November 2006 19:52

To: Bennett.MLA, Bill

Subject: Big Game Allocations

Dear Bill:

I am writing to let you know that the proposed big game allocation process is an insult to the residents of British Columbia and insult to the rights of BC hunters. Giving Guide/Outfitters such a large piece of the pie and guaranteeing their rights is absurd. I know that your government bows to the almighty dollar and faces east three times each day (not to Mecca, but to Wall Street), but even given that bent, the fact is that the resident hunter provides 100 times the revenue that nonresidents do. Look to the south and see that guides take a distant second to

residents in every state; as they should here. Please respond to the wishes of your constituency and let Minister Penner know that this is unacceptable.

Sincerely, Maarten Hart

Fernie Rod & Gun Club

President

From: Bennett, Bill SMIN:EX

Sent: 29 January 2007 20:55

Subject: Your e-mail of November 19th

Mr. Hart,

I am in my hotel room in Vancouver tonight reviewing the wildlife allocation in preparation for a meeting I have with minister Penner and I came across your November 19th email. I have been reading through this stuff since 5 pm today and meanwhile downstairs in this hotel is the biggest mining conference in BC that I ought to be participating in. Fortunately, I am almost done with my review. Your email, mercifully, was at the very bottom of my pile of paper.

Let me be very direct with you, as you were with me.

- It is my understanding that you are an American, so I don't give a shit what your opinion is on Canada or Canadian residents.

- Our government does not "... bow to the almighty dollar and face east to Wall Street each day...", but we do recognize a fool when we come across one. How do you think you are representing the interests of your members when you insult the BC hunter's strongest advocate, yours truly. I have spent an inordinate amount of time trying to sort out this allocation file. It is complex, something that you obviously have enormous difficulty with. You don't know who your friends are, which makes you dumb.

- Don't lecture me about "listening to the wishes of my constituents". As someone who has spent the past six years working my ass off for my constituents, I am not about to take that kind of bullshit from someone who, for all I know, is up here as an American spy who is actually interested in helping the US create a park in the Flathead.

I will continue to work for hunters and anglers in the East Kootenay as I always have and you will continue to be a self-inflated, pompous, American know-it-all.

Have a nice day.

Bill Bennett

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Ran with fact box "Exchange That Brought Down a Minister", which has been appended to the end of the story.