

New face, same issue

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It's getting awfully tough to maintain any sense of optimism on aboriginal land claims and Premier Dalton McGuinty's cabinet shuffle last week did nothing to dispel the gloomy outlook.

McGuinty moved Michael Bryant out of aboriginal affairs after less than a year in the portfolio and replaced him with former labour minister Brad Duguid.

When Bryant was named aboriginal affairs minister a year ago there was some enthusiasm that the move represented a shift by the province to make First Nations more of a priority or at least pursue an activist agenda.

The most depressing spin you can put on the departure of Bryant, who previously served as attorney general, is that it represents a year of wasted effort and a sign the province is bumping native issues down the priority list.

The most optimistic spin you can put on the shuffle is that Duguid will bring a fresh perspective to land claim negotiations that appear to be going nowhere. That, in itself, implies that the existing process is not working.

The reality in either case is that a steep learning curve awaits Duguid as he must now acquaint himself with all of the players and issues.

With the arrest of a Six Nations man Friday for his involvement in a protest near Caledonia on Labour Day, Duguid will not get a gentle welcome to the portfolio.

Sadly, a revolving door at the land claims negotiations springing from a Six Nations occupation in Caledonia that started two and a half years ago is nothing new.

Those sitting at the table for the federal and provincial governments are well paid, but they don't last very long.

And the ministers in charge of the files don't last long either. Federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Chuck Strahl has had the portfolio for just over a year, but keeps such a low profile you'd hardly know the ministry still exists.

With an election in less than a month, there could be a cabinet shuffle at the federal level soon, too.

In the meantime, the problem is not getting any better in Brantford. Protests by Six Nations activists have stopped various projects in the city. Last week, a residential development in Eagle Place was the latest to be halted by aboriginal protesters.

It is clear from the local campaigns for the federal riding of Brant that all of the candidates are focused on the land claims issue. That's good, because as we've said many times, only the federal government has the power to resolve these claims.

Now all we need is some good news. The rejection by Six Nations leadership of the \$26-million offer to settle the Welland Canal claim on the first full day of the election campaign provided little reason for hope.

A new provincial aboriginal affairs minister can be portrayed as a fresh start, but what we really need are signs of progress on land claims.

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