

Fontaine wants to stay tops at AFN

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OTTAWA — Phil Fontaine plans to seek an unprecedented fourth term as Canada's top native politician, but he is already being challenged for the job.

It is his second consecutive stint as head of the national Assembly of First Nations (AFN), which he also led between 1997 and 2000.

Sources say Mr. Fontaine, who is riding high after last month's residential schools apology in Parliament, hopes to renew his three-year term when it ends next summer.

A growing buzz in native circles and on the Internet suggests that he will have competition.

“I don't care who else is running. I'm running,” said Perry Bellegarde, a career politician and former AFN vice-chief for Saskatchewan who has raised eyebrows by openly glad-handing well before next year's vote.

“I think any organization is open for change, new ideas and new innovative ways of dealing with issues,” he said in an interview.

“It's up to the leadership to make that decision and choice. Any person that puts their name forward is to be commended. I think there will be four or five of us.”

Mr. Bellegarde, 45, plans to be in Quebec City on Tuesday as the 600-member assembly starts its three-day annual meeting with a speech from Quebec Premier Jean Charest.

“I'll be taking a lot of chiefs for coffee.”

Mr. Fontaine declined to be interviewed, but his inner circle bristled at a request for a response to widespread discussion about the coming leadership race, including a Facebook online forum called “2009 Assembly of First Nations National Chief Election.”

“The national chief has not publicly or privately indicated his intentions whatsoever,” said Ajay Chopra, Mr. Fontaine's former senior adviser and campaign organizer. “He will do so in due course.”

Stewart Phillip, head of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, does not see it that way.

“The national chief stated at the outcome of the last AFN election that this was going to be his final term. That was a very significant statement on his part, and certainly we received it to be a significant statement.”

That said, there have been “rather high-profile fund-raising events” held in the past two years by the “Friends of Phil Fontaine,” Mr. Phillip said.

“So I would think that's being done for a purpose which hasn't been made clear at this point.”

The assembly is at a critical juncture after helping settle a multibillion-dollar compensation package for former residential school students – including a five-year truth and reconciliation commission and a historic apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Mr. Phillip said.

“I think it would be healthy if we did have a solid leadership race and the opportunity to hear new ideas, new approaches and new strategies.

“I do not think we can afford to continue on with the status quo. The suffering in our communities is too great,” he said of deepening poverty.

“I can't help but think we need to be more pointed and focused and aggressive in our approach to the Harper government and these outstanding issues.”

Other names circulating as potential challengers include Shawn Atleo, AFN vice-chief for British Columbia, and John Beaucage, grand chief of the Union of Ontario Indians.

Mr. Atleo declined through a spokesman to comment – except to say he supports Mr. Fontaine and is focused on his own job as regional chief.

Mr. Beaucage denied any plans to run.

“I have heard the rumour for quite a while,” he said with a laugh. “I think I'll be staying right where I am.”

Mr. Fontaine, 63, was first elected national chief in 1997 after a long career in provincial and local native politics in Manitoba. Known for a diplomatic and conciliatory approach, he was defeated in 2000 by Matthew Coon Come, who capitalized on Mr. Fontaine's perceived coziness with the Liberal government.

Mr. Fontaine easily won re-election, however, in 2003 and 2006.

A long-time aboriginal leader who spoke on condition of anonymity said Mr. Fontaine “has been a very effective national chief, and I still support him 100 per cent.

“But at times we do need a change.”

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