



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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## Winnipeg Free for All

**T**here is a power struggle going on at City Hall that may open an opportunity for everyday Winnipeggers - if we get organized - to transform structural factors that have long entrenched business-led corruption and austerity on Main Street. Mayor Bowman - who campaigned on a platform of “accountability” - is being pushed to keep his promise by a handful of city councillors calling for an immediate review of the City’s civic governance structure that could ultimately lead to significant reforms. Bowman has sidestepped the decision for nearly a year, putting it off in November and again in March. At some point his hand will be forced. But what exactly is wrong with Winnipeg’s civic governance structure and how did it get so bad?

Winnipeg’s “strong mayor” is the most glaring problem. The mayor dictates city council decisions by controlling membership in the Executive Policy Committee (EPC), a privileged group of city councillors. While EPC councillors are not required to follow the mayor’s lead, the access to information, notoriety, and increased salary bestowed by EPC membership means that they almost always do. This gives the mayor a voting bloc large enough to win almost any city council vote. The very existence of the EPC, in fact, creates a two-tier system that leaves the non-EPC majority of city council out of crucial policy-development processes. The egregious amount of power given to the unelected Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) - an individual with as much if not more power than city council itself - further

bolsters the power of the mayor, who is able to hire or fire the CAO via EPC. Removing the mayor’s power over EPC and redistributing the power of - or abolishing - the CAO are the most immediate steps a reform effort could take.

The concentration of power and the further exclusion of everyday people from civic governance decisions, however, has also been achieved by slashing the number of city councillors who represent us and by abolishing formal avenues for citizen participation. The paltry fifteen city councillors we have now - down from fifty in 1972 - means that there are twice as many provincial ridings in Winnipeg as there are municipal wards, despite the fact that the local state is supposed to be the level of government most directly accessible to the people. Large wards - which inherently limit our access to and influence over elected representatives - are especially problematic because regular Winnipeggers have few other structural outlets to influence city policy. Winnipeg’s once relatively robust infrastructure of Resident Advisory Groups (RAGs) and Community Committees has been systematically dismantled. Smaller wards and formal avenues for citizen participation should be on any reform agenda.

The big picture is that all of this - the “strong mayor”, EPC, CAO, large wards, lack of participation structures - is

there is an alternative.

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the result of a decades-long reactionary movement to gut local democracy under the guise of “streamlining” and “efficiency”. Almost immediately after the Manitoba NDP established Unicity in 1972 - which was democratic enough to have been called a “bold experiment in citizen participation” - Conservative governments began to undermine it. Together, the Lyon and Filmon governments cut the number of city councillors from fifty to fifteen, reduced the number of Community Committees by more than half, and severely weakened their powers. Most drastically, following the City’s last civic governance review - initiated in 1997 by Mayor Thompson - Filmon imposed the “strong mayor” provisions, abolished RAGs, and further slashed Community Committees.

A big-picture perspective allows us to view this series of events as a type of counter-revolution: As businessmen and large property owners gradually lost their formal monopoly on civic governance - ceding the vote to women, workers, Indigenous peoples, and people of colour, whose collective power mounted as the 1970s began - the former turned to altering the City’s governance structure as a way of keeping the people out of City Hall.

Evidence for this can be found in the specific policy direction the reforms ushered in. Thompson pursued an aggressive neoliberal agenda to cut services, impose user fees, privatize public resources, and slash business and property taxes. The restructuring she initiated sought to disempower anyone — especially City workers, inner city residents, and their allies on City Council — who resisted such policies. It has been impressively effective. Since 1997 civic governance in Winnipeg has been based largely on slashing taxes, cutting services, and investing exponentially in police. This agenda has benefitted wealthy property and business owners and has seriously worsened the lives of women, Indigenous peoples, people of colour, migrants, homeless people, youth, seniors, tenants, transit riders, and people with disabilities — in other words, most people.

Shuttered pools, libraries, and community centres, poor and expensive bus service, skyrocketing homelessness, underfunded youth services, and a militarized police force are, in part, the concrete results of this forty-year attack on local democracy.

With a new round of reform coming up, we have a rare chance to correct one of the structural determinants keeping Winnipeg from becoming the city we need it to be. Reforms to EPC may be necessary but they will not be enough. We need new structures that enable everyday people not only to voice their opinions but to reach the levers of power. The current spirit of scorn for corruption, perhaps, can be turned toward major gains for Winnipeggers who have long fought for community control over the resources and institutions that affect our lives.

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*References available upon request.*