



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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The Shock Doctrine Playing Out in Manitoba

Noted Canadian author and social activist Naomi Klein published *The Shock Doctrine* more than a decade ago. The book's major thesis is that governments and others in position of power exploit national and international crises to establish controversial policies while citizens are too distracted to notice, to engage and to resist. Rahm Emmanuel, former chief of staff of President Obama, captured the essence of this strategy in his remark that "Never let a good crisis go to waste."

According to script, our newest crisis, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, now appears to be providing cover for the misuse of power internationally, domestically and locally.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban, the strong man of Hungary, was quick to see that draconian measures imposed all across Europe provided a perfect cover to reach for more power. Legislation passed by the Hungarian Parliament, controlled by his party, effectively allows him to rule by decree, cancel elections and punish spreaders of "false" information. Indefinitely.

Other governments have taken advantage of the crisis to take actions that otherwise would have been strongly resisted. With India under lockdown, the Hindu-nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced laws that would make it easier for Indians to become permanent residents in the Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir region.

Canadians may feel that our politicians are above such Machiavellian practices. We understand that the governments of the day must be granted some leeway in order to respond to rapidly moving and often unpredictable events. While there will be some disagreement on what this means in practice, we expect our politicians to faithfully pursue our public interests in times of crisis, not partisan ones. We also expect their actions to be balanced, transparent and respectful of democratic accountability.

Emerging evidence in Canada suggests the need for vigilance. Last week, for example, the Alberta government hastily passed Bill 12: The Liabilities Management Statutes Act in a three-day emergency session. As reported by the Canadian Press, a provincial watchdog group claims that "[t]his [bill] has very little to do with COVID. It wasn't possible for landowner[s] or opposition politicians to digest or analyze, let alone meaningfully respond, in three days. One has to assume that was the objective." A University of Calgary law professor concluded that "[t]his was rammed through in a most inappropriate way."

Now we have a similarly troubling but even larger political drama about to play out in Manitoba. Premier Pallister is recalling the Manitoba Legislature tomorrow for an extraordinary one-day session to pass emergency legislation to assist Manitobans impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Premier Pallister

there is an alternative.

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said in media reports that the Legislature will sit to “free up literally billions of dollars to support frontline health care workers and our health care system.” Premier Pallister added that this emergency one-day session is not the time for partisan politics. Rather, “[t]his is the time to remain focused together on the pandemic response, and to enact the measures to ensure that we’re protecting Manitobans as best we possible can.”

The clarity of the commitment, however, is confounded by the Premier’s plan to pass up to eight additional bills at tomorrow’s sitting, not only the yet to be tabled emergency COVID-19 legislation. Not stopping there, he also plans to expedite all existing bills through Second Reading. These additional bills appear to have little if anything to do with the pandemic. Rather, many of the bills are complex, controversial and, if passed, will have significant long-term consequences. Pushing the bills through outside the normal legislative procedures will mean avoiding transparency, debate and public input that are bedrocks of democratic accountability.

With so many Manitobans struggling with the pandemic and with front-line workers giving so much, now is not the time to use the government’s majority to push through controversial bills based on political convenience. Now is the time for the Premier to double down on the sixth of the Conservative Party’s Statement of Guiding Principles posted on the party’s website: “A government that is respectful of and responsive to the will of the people it serves; committed to both the responsibilities and the spirit of democracy.”

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PRIVATE CONTRACTS FUNDED DURING MANITOBA COVID PANDEMIC TO DATE:

- \$18 million for private home-based childcare administered by Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce
- \$4.5 million for internet Cognitive Behavioural Therapy delivered by Morneau Shepell Corp
- \$4 million for Manitoba businesses for federal government supports to InTouch 24/7 call centre

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