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Reversing the Damage:

How the Federal Liberals Can Restore Hope on the Prairies

Lynne Fernandez,
Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues

**Reversing the Damage: How the Federal Liberals
Can Restore Hope on the Prairies**

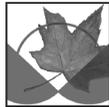
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Introduction

By 2013 the Conservative government had cut overall federal taxes and other revenues to the lowest rate seen in more than 70 years.¹ Spending cuts followed lockstep and between 2011 and March 2015, between 25,000 and 30,000 federal public sector positions were eliminated, leaving Canada with a small civil service relative to its population.² Between 2010 and 2015, 4,766 civil service jobs were lost in the prairie region (1,875 in Manitoba; 799 in Saskatchewan; 2,092 in Alberta³). At the time of writing, data were not available for departmental breakdowns of the regional job cuts.

Despite assurances by the Conservatives that fundamental services and programs were not being undermined by these cuts, there is reason to be concerned. Valuable services such as those provided by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Veterans Affairs, Employment and Social Development Agency, front line Canada Revenue staff and National Parks conservation and maintenance programs were and will be diminished by these cuts if they are not halted. Job cuts have left offices under-resourced with remaining staff being overworked as they try to

meet the public's needs. This paper will examine how the prairie region is being affected by these cuts and recommend how funding and programs be restored.

The recently elected Liberal Party has the opportunity to reverse the damage caused by the cuts. In his September 25th *Open Letter to Canada's Public Servants*,⁴ Prime Minister Trudeau promised to respect and work with government employees and restore service levels to Veterans Affairs and Employment and Social Development Canada offices that provide EI and CPP services.

Mr. Trudeau also promised to forge a new relationship with Canadian scientists, some of whom would have worked on four federal agricultural programs that had many positive impacts on the prairies. As this report explains, these programs were cut by the Conservatives despite the abundance of evidence — in some cases over decades — that they delivered important economic, social and environmental results. Re-activating these programs would go a long way towards protecting a valuable and unique ecosystem and supporting agricultural production on Canada's prairies.

Veterans Affairs/Employment and Social Development Canada

Veterans Affairs staff has been reduced by 24 percent with approximately 900 jobs lost across the country.⁵ The Public Sector Alliance of Canada (PSAC) advised that in the prairies, Brandon and Saskatoon will see their staff reduced from five and 14 respectively to one staff member for each office — both of whom now work for Service Canada rather than in offices dedicated to Veteran Affairs. Files will be transferred to Regina and Winnipeg at the same time as staff is cut in both those offices. In the case of Regina, staff will be cut while the number of files will double. PSAC advises that the impact on veterans seeking help with pensions, access to disability payments and health services will be considerable, especially for those Veterans with limited mobility or lack of access to transportation. In December, 2015 the Liberals promised to reopen the Brandon and Saskatoon Veteran Affairs offices within a year.⁶

If not halted, by 2017 cuts to Employment and Social Development Canada will halve the staff dealing with Canadians calling in for information about Employment Insurance (EI). Between 2011 and 2013, 26 million calls to the EI helpline were blocked and more than a million callers hung up before being served.⁷ We

do not have access to figures for the prairie region, but recent estimates for the number of Employment and Social Development workers who have received affected notices are as high as 413.⁸ One employee noted that: “we lost hundreds of staff across the region when offices consolidated and closed”.

Also according to frontline workers, the loss of staff also meant that there was a large increase in wait times. This impacted mostly revised claims (where the claimant is requesting a change or reporting an incident). These claims were stalled for up to two years without agent intervention and initial applications were also delayed for approximately 3–4 months. There is logically a direct correlation between wait times and the stress and anger clients experience. This frustration places social and economic strain on clients and increases hostility, name calling and abuse toward staff.

Workloads have increased along with an influx of requests for overtime, with employees often having to claim 20 hours of overtime per week over the past four years. “Overall morale has declined and, despite efforts at local levels, we have not seen an improvement. We have seen rising mental health issues (and) mental

health and stress are the number one reason staff are going off on leave,” said one worker. The economy is also showing no signs of turning around, meaning EI claims are only going to keep growing.

These cuts will exacerbate earlier changes made by the Conservatives. In 2012, it shrunk the number of staff processing EI claims and closed the call centre in Manitoba, frustrating claimants’ attempts at getting information about their files.

Canadian Pension Plan

As Canada’s approximately 8.2 million baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1965) apply for their pensions, the workload for Service Canada Benefits Officers (SCBO) increases. Not all boomers are as tech savvy as younger generations, so many correspond by phone or with written enquiries. In addition, staff notes that the new Corporate Management Payment System (CPMS) has experienced many problems since being introduced in 2015, causing extra work for SCBOs working on the CPP. Despite

being understaffed, overtime for SCBOs has recently been cancelled — resulting in, according to one worker: “[...] an increased backlog in various types of Canada Pension Plan applications. The increased backlog creates stress for all levels of processing in CPP. The ramification of all three of these items is that there are longer wait times for clients’ applications to be processed. We strive to meet our speed of service on a daily basis but there are times they just can’t be met.”

National Parks

We also know that Parks Canada in Alberta was targeted but we don't know the specifics of the cutbacks. There were 638 full-time positions eliminated across Canada, with 40 per cent from the prairies, and according to the Union of National Employees/Public Service Alliance of Canada another 1,000 employees had their seasonal hours reduced. Not only will visitors notice a difference in service and amenities, but crucial conservation measures will be abandoned or not implemented. It is feared that chronic underfunding is putting Canada's cultural and natural heritage at risk.⁹

One media report explained how national parks across Canada have been affected by winter service cuts. In Manitoba, Riding Mountain National Park now relies on a few volunteers to maintain cross country ski trails. They receive funding from a local resort and community group to buy fuel and one individual often uses his own snowmobile to pack the trail. He emphasized that "(We) still feel it is a core park service but don't want to see the trails fall into disrepair and not be used. Our concern is once people get used to skiing elsewhere, they will be very difficult to get back".¹⁰ Other National Parks affected in the prairie region include Elk Island in Alberta and Waskesiu north of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.

Many local businesses depend on the activity these parks see in the winter months.¹¹

Other concerns come from organizations like the Canada Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) whose director claimed:

When it comes to science capacity, it isn't that there is duplication or waste," Mr. Hébert-Daly said. "If you're cutting it by 30 per cent, you are cutting the actual science by 30 per cent. And what that means is more species will go extinct without us knowing about it. It means that more and more parks are going to get threatened by all sorts of dangers that we aren't able to measure."¹²

Although impossible to measure the tragedy of species extinction, we can measure the economic impact of Canada's parks system. A Parks Canada document estimated that Canada's natural parks generate \$3.3 billion worth of economic activity in 400 communities across Canada.¹³ Lack of data made it impossible to estimate how much economic activity will be lost in the prairie region, but Banff and Jasper National Parks are two of the country's most important parks, making these cuts particularly onerous.

There are also staffing problems stemming from these budget cuts. There are fewer admin-

istrative support personnel to perform the tasks and, given the promise of reinvestment in infrastructure from the new Liberal government, it will be a challenge to meet appropriate staffing levels in procurement and finance.

Job losses have caused a vacuum in some operational areas. New hires of term employees

have replaced long-term employees who have organizational memory: “the loss of corporate memory during such a reckless purge of Parks Canada staff have left employees with less opportunity, isolated from friends and colleagues with many remaining in precarious employment situations,” said one Parks employee.

The Loss of Agricultural Programs

Whereas the dangers from the loss (nationally) of 1,407 full-time Food Inspection Agency staff¹⁴ were immediately obvious, the demise of some of the lesser-known local programs received little, if any attention. But the value of these programs to all Canadians should not be underestimated, especially from an inter-generational perspective. Biodiversity, wildlife habitat, soil and water conservation and carbon sequestration are just some of the natural processes enhanced by these programs — programs that have been quietly making a difference on the prairies for decades.

Agriculture is synonymous with the prairies and both federal and provincial governments play important roles in supporting the industry. This is perhaps best, albeit tragically for many farmers, demonstrated in the federal government's decision to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board.¹⁵ The loss of the following four acclaimed agricultural programs will also have long lasting, negative results for communities and families.

Beef Cattle Program

The closure of the Beef Cattle Program at the Brandon Research and Development Centre not only cut jobs, it removed the economic activity

that sustained one of the largest research herds in western Canada (approximately 800 head). Local producers of fuel, building materials, feed and bedding, as well as local veterinarians have noticed the loss.¹⁶

The research will now be done in Lacombe, Alberta, but local cattle producers are still worried about the Brandon program being shut down. They note the need for local research that considers local conditions.¹⁷

Cereal Research Centre

Although the 2012 closure of the Cereal Research Centre at the University of Manitoba did not result in direct layoffs of research staff, there were concerns about the private-sector takeover of the centre's seed-breeding program, and the logic in moving the centre from its Winnipeg location.¹⁸ Public investment in plant breeding has been a key part of the foundation of Canada's multi-billion dollar grain industry. Up to 50 percent of the wheat and oat crops in Canada come from varieties developed at the centre, and that public investment gives very high returns: for every dollar invested, twenty dollars is returned.¹⁹ In other words, if the government invests \$30 million

in breeding wheat, it stimulates the agricultural production and supply chains by \$600 million, resulting in better crops, wages and more tax revenue and spending in rural communities.²⁰ When this sort of research is privatized, smaller portions of returns are re-invested in new research.²¹

Research by Mazzucato shows that public-sector research is the real motor driving innovation. Risk-adverse private capital will not invest in research for the sake of knowledge or try unproven theories. Instead it waits to capitalize on the proven research done by publically-funded institutes and scientists such as those who worked for the University of Manitoba's Cereal Research Centre.²²

Prairie Shelterbelt Program

The 2012 shutdown of the Prairie Shelterbelt Program affected the small rural community of Indian Head Saskatchewan. The program provided crucial support for carbon sequestration, biodiversity, soil and water conservation and preservation of wildlife habitat.

Started in 1901, the Shelterbelt Program provided over 600 million trees to rural landowners. The Conservatives shut down the program in 2012 and it was taken over by a non-profit organization called Help International which relied heavily on volunteers. According to the CEO: "To make this happen without government funding, it takes a lot of sacrifice, a lot of volunteerism, but we will be hiring and are already hiring local," he said. "But even those people are making big sacrifices. The charitable pay scale compared to the government, it might be 50 per cent [less] compared to that."²³

Unfortunately HELP International was hampered by the federal government²⁴ and the efforts of the volunteers proved insufficient. According to a September 2015 report in the *Leader-Post*:

As of this date, the tree nursery at Indian Head sits abandoned. More than three million seedlings are still left in the fields and are growing in appalling conditions — the weeds in places are three feet high! These trees should have been harvested and shipped for wildlife, farmyard and conservation plantings, which would benefit not just farmers, but all Canadians.

Considering these tree seedlings are worth more than a dollar each, we see another example of waste and mismanagement. They should be harvested this fall — if they aren't, it will result in a financial waste to the taxpayer and a loss to all Canadians.²⁵

An update in the *Leader-Post* in November 2015 reported the definitive demise of the program. The Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities passed a resolution to work with the new federal government to revive the initiative. During the election, the Liberals supported restarting the program,²⁶ but this commitment could be on shaky ground given the deplorable state of the nursery.

Community Pastures Program

The federal government's Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) has been called Canada's greatest success story.²⁷ The program started in 1935 to deal with the devastation the Dust Bowl brought to the southern prairies. It included initiatives to deal with erosion, water access, irrigation and grass management through the Community Pastures Programs. These pastures are found in Alberta,ⁱ Saskatchewan and Manitoba and cover over 2 million acres in total. The greatest acreage is in Saskatchewan with 1.77 million acres. More than 200,000 cattle are pastured by approximately 3,100 'patrons' (ranch-

ⁱ Alberta's pastures were always under provincial control; Manitoba's and Saskatchewan's were managed federally. <http://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/2012/09/13/grazing-reserve-serves-%E2%80%A8patrons-from-wide-area%E2%80%A9/>

ers/farmers) who pay for the use of the Crown land.²⁸ But omnibus Bill-C38 brought in by the federal government in March 2012 was the beginning of the end for this program.²⁹

The scope of this program extends far beyond helping farmers and ranchers have access to valuable pasture. Pasture managers are trained in soil and water conservation and native plant management and understand the crucial role these processes play in protecting the endangered species that live on these ancient ecosystems. As reported in the *Globe and Mail*:

As rare and ecologically important as coastal old-growth forest, the PFRA grasslands are listed by the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) as lands that Canada has made a commitment to protect.³⁰

Despite the obligation the government has to protect these lands, the program is being mothballed ostensibly because it has achieved its goal of restoring damaged grasslands. The lands are being turned over to the control of the respective provinces and Saskatchewan plans to sell or lease the pastures to patrons, thereby transferring its obligation to conserve and protect the land into private hands. Although Saskatchewan's Agricultural Minister claimed in 2013 that there would be a requirement that the pastures would have to remain whole (no cultivation; no drainage), many are worried about a lack of regulation and enforcement of these stipulations.³¹

Under federal control the program was able to fend off the worst of modern development, but oil and gas companies were (and still are) allowed to run wells, flow lines, pipelines and access roads — causing significant environmental damage.³² Putting the land under provincial jurisdiction will erode protection and monitoring even more. For example, PFRA staff enforced federal acts (including the Species at Risk Act), but on Provincial Crown lands these acts will not apply. Furthermore, oil and gas companies were required to follow procedures developed by

the PFRA regarding environmental assessment and operation procedures, including vegetation and soil management, and drilling in the winter. These protocols which helped protect species and habitat will not be enforced under provincial jurisdiction.³³

Manitoba's 400,000 acres will fall under the control of the provincial government which will continue renting them out to patrons, under the management of a non-profit organization — the Association of Manitoba Community Pastures (AMCP). As of October 2015, 14 of the 23 community pastures were taken over by the province, with the remaining 9 slated to be transferred in the coming year.³⁴ Manitoba has pledged to support the program, claiming that the pastures help the province fight climate change and protect biodiversity. It has pledged over a million dollars to the project,³⁵ but it is not known how closely the provincially run program will be to the PFRA or how arm's length it will be from the AMCP.

The value of the ongoing participation of the government is further demonstrated by an analysis of the economic returns of the program. University of Saskatchewan professors calculated its net benefit after costs to be \$33 million.³⁶ These benefits accrue to local economies and are in addition to the incalculable benefits of the environmental services this ecosystem provides. These lands also contain cultural and historical treasures such as a sundial, Indigenous burial sites and teepee rings, but First Nations have not been consulted regarding the withdrawal of federal control.³⁷

The overwhelming success of the Community Pastures Program is due to the benefits of a community 'commons' approach. When a common resource is properly managed with an eye to protecting its profit-generating aspect (the cattle) and the environment (which we all benefit from), a delicate balance between human activity and natural processes allows both to flourish. The environmental diversity of the grasslands depends on the pastures, and vice

versa. The worry in Saskatchewan is that through unregulated re-sale the land will eventually end up in the hands of resource developers or even foreign speculators who will not understand or care about preserving the natural balance of these unique ecosystems.³⁸

The disruption caused by the demise of the Community Pastures Programs will hit families hard. Up to eighty managers and their families have been affected, with many losing their livelihoods.³⁹

Although serious damage has already occurred, we can prevent further deterioration by acting quickly. Western Canadians are looking to the newly elected federal government with hope, especially in the light of campaign promises to restore program funding, increase spending on infrastructure and protect the environment. By acting on the following recommendations, the new government will begin to restore Canadian's faith in the ability of government to act in the best interest of us all.

Recommendations

Agricultural Programs

The current government made a campaign promise to “Invest \$160 million in an Agri-Food Value Added Investment Fund over 4 years”.⁴⁰ Part of this spending should be earmarked for:

- Revival of the Beef Cattle Program in Brandon so that Manitoba cattle producers have access to local research to enhance their businesses.
- Relocation of the Cereal Research program to the University of Manitoba so that public-sector investment can leverage higher returns on this important research and ensure that research results are widely available to all interested parties.

The Liberals also promised that if elected, they would “Invest \$200 million more each year to support innovation and the use of clean technologies in our natural resource sectors, including the forestry, fisheries, mining, energy, and agricultural sectors”.⁴¹ Although not technology *per se*, programs such as the Shelter Belt and Community Pastures clearly protect the environment at the same time as they enhance sustainable agricultural practices. Some of this investment must be earmarked for the following recommendations:

Shelter Belt Program

Given the deteriorated state of the nursery, it is not clear if this program is salvageable. The government needs to study how best to deliver the benefits of the program through the \$200 million earmarked for investment in natural resource protection.

Community Pastures Program

It does not make sense to chop up the management of a fragile eco-system just because it crosses provincial borders. There is no guarantee that each province will adopt best practices or that they will coordinate management practices. Environmental deterioration from mismanagement in one province could end up spreading to another. Furthermore, removing the area from federal purview means that it no longer falls under the protection of more rigorous federal regulations.

- Twenty of the 62 pastures in Saskatchewan have already been transferred to patron groups so it is now very important to ensure the lands are not sold and that conservation easements are registered and closely monitored.⁴² Such monitoring will now fall under the purview of the provincial

government, so the federal government should work with it to ensure that the benefits of the original program are not lost.

- Those pastures in Saskatchewan that have not been transferred to patrons should remain under federal control and the program reinstated.
- Manitoba is reportedly doing a better job of balancing public and private costs and benefits,⁴³ and some Manitoba municipalities are stepping in to ensure the protection of environmentally sensitive areas.⁴⁴ The new federal government should support and collaborate with the provincial and relevant municipal governments to ensure resources are available to continue the spirit of the original program and to ensure conformity of management and standards with those pastures in Saskatchewan that remain in federal hands.

National Parks

The Trudeau government promised to “Restore Parks Canada funding by reversing the cuts totalling \$25 million”.⁴⁵ This funding should first be used to restore positions and program spending in those Prairie Region Parks affected by the Conservative’s cuts. The length of park seasons, cut by the Conservatives to reduce seasonal employment, needs to be restored and more personnel hired.⁴⁶

Veterans Affairs/Employment and Social Development Canada

Veterans are hopeful that the Liberal promise to hire 400 additional delivery staff and spend \$20 million on two new centres of excellence will be kept. They are also waiting to see if the new government acts upon the auditor general’s recommendations to improve mental health services,⁴⁷ and make good on the promise to reopen Veteran Affairs offices in Brandon and Saskatoon. The following recommendations will improve service across the region:

- Significant re-investment in ESDC across the country is needed so that the current government can meet its promise to halve the waiting time to receive EI benefits. The more than 2,900 jobs cut from the department (nationally) need to be restored across the country.⁴⁸ Employees are currently working up to 20 extra hours per week in an effort to deal with backlogs while keeping up with incoming requests. Such conditions lead to job strain and illness.
- Citizens and staff need to know that their government is committed to their wellbeing and will do more about mental health issues that arise from the stress and pressure. Messaging should go out to front line staff (citizen services and call centers) with realistic time-frames for EI claims. Staff and citizens suffer when people are advised claims will take 28 days when in reality it takes three months. The same should apply to call backs as people are often told a callback will occur in three days but it often takes two weeks.
- In order to improve morale, leave options should be reinstated so that staff can have work life balance. Being able to bank overtime as time off and taking leave with income averaging would allow employees to better manage their lives.
- When staffing levels are restored, government should reopen offices or find larger buildings to accommodate staff. The consolidated sites are working at maximum capacity, making it impossible to incorporate new staff.

Canadian Pension Plan

The amount of completed items required in a day needs to be lowered to avoid undue stress and mental fatigue. At the same time, hiring and training should occur more rapidly so as to reinstate a level of staffing that can meet the public’s needs while avoiding unreasonable delays and employee burnout.

Conclusion

Years of Conservative spending cuts are about much more than a decline in job numbers. Each job lost takes a personal toll on workers, individuals and families, erodes social services and puts our fragile environment at greater risk.

Significant spending cuts will clearly compromise services and programs in the prairie region if not reversed by the new government. The obvious loss of service to veterans, to those seeking information about Employment Insurance, CPP or income taxes, to the thousands who visit our National Parks and the wildlife that rely on their proper management will be sorely felt. The decades of benefit derived from cutting-edge programs such as the Community Pastures and Shelterbelt programs will be compromised as volunteers try, and fail, to do the work of well-paid professionals, or as private land owners lose the direction of a holistic government program that embraced and protected the wisdom of the commons.

By framing the cuts in the logic of austerity and responsible spending, the federal Conservatives downloaded costs to already over-burdened municipal and provincial governments and prairie families. These cutbacks end up being wasteful and counterproductive: will it now cost more to bring resources and services up to a reasonable level than what was 'saved' when they were eliminated?

These changes have also placed federal employees under tremendous stress while frustrating the public with undue delays in service delivery. If these cuts are not reversed and successful programs reinstated, future generations will have to deal with the consequences of loss of valuable services, deterioration of the environment and yet one more example of the tragedy of the commons.

Let's hope the new Liberal government quickly makes good on its campaign promises and begins to restore these valuable programs.

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