



Canadian Centre for
Policy Alternatives
Manitoba Office

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Economic security, democratic rights and the secret ballot

Democracy. The word carries a deep meaning for citizens of nations rooted in western democratic traditions. The full measure of the word far exceeds the individual rights it implies. For Canadians, it is viscerally connected to the foundations of our history.

The word embodies the weight of sacrifices made by the many who defended democracy against grave dangers in the past and their memory occupies the deepest recesses of our collective consciousness, imploring us to forever stand vigilant against future dangers. As Canadians, we will never lack the inspiration to defend our rights. We are bound by these principles, not only as Canadians but across borders with citizens of other nations, near and far.

When democratic principles are summoned in support of public policy, our first instinct is often a supportive response. In Manitoba, democratic rights have been invoked to support legislative changes proposed under Bill 7, introduced by the Pallister Government. The suggestion that union workers are entitled to cast secret ballots resonates easily and broadly across our socio-economic strata. Democracy conjures a powerful instinct, one that is difficult to contest.

Soon, Bill 7 will be debated in the Manitoba Legislature and as it winds through the legislative process, those opposed will raise questions of fairness and public necessity. These arguments, although reasoned, may

do little to overcome our emotional connection to the democratic principles invoked by supporters. Lynton Crosby, a Conservative Australian political mastermind, has said reason stands no chance when competing with emotion.

The suggested rationale for Bill 7 is simple; it is about democracy. In our system, it is a compelling argument that the franchise, whether to elect governments or to unionize, is an individual right best exercised in secret. But is that the full extent of our democracy?

Democracy is more than the right to cast secret ballots. A healthy democracy needs an informed and economically secure electorate. Being informed requires that we are able to reason through hollow arguments, that if accepted at face value, would only serve to undermine our enduring interests. Economic security depends on a foundation that offers a reasonable degree of equality for all citizens. Democracy is not solely a function of the single moment when citizens vote.

Democracy is corrupted by economic and social inequality. It seldom takes hold in societies that are struggling under the weight of economic or social unfairness. Even secure societies can be undermined by economic and social stressors. In the ongoing US Presidential election, our American neighbours are irreconcilably divided. The inexpli-

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IN LABOUR ISSUES

“The IMF and OECD have released convincing economic data that directly links wealth concentration and slower growth with declining unionization in western democracies.”

cable rise of Donald Trump is a symptom of social and economic duress. If Mr. Trump is elected, it will be by secret ballot.

As Manitoba debates Bill 7, we cannot be distracted by the invocation of democratic principles and overlook fundamental socio-economic factors that must also be taken into account. But what are these factors?

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz have recently highlighted bread and butter reasons to proceed with extreme caution. The IMF and OECD have released convincing economic data that directly links wealth concentration and slower growth with declining unionization in western democracies.

Both organizations say that when unions decline, so does the middle class. At the same time, more wealth concentrates into fewer hands. This is not the position of left leaning, union organizations. Neither the IMF nor the OECD can be accused of occupying a position on the left side of the political or economic spectra.

These organizations have consistently promoted pro-business, small government economic policies. Hard economic data has forced them to admit Thatcherism and Reaganism were very bad for our economies. They now acknowledge that a thirty-year assault on the right of workers to unionize has tipped the balance far too far.

Ironically, while Mr. Pallister’s Government is seeking to enact Bill 7, the Trudeau Government is repealing Bills C-377 and C-525 enacted by the Harper Conservatives. Prime Minister Harper also invoked democracy to enact legislation that was roundly criticized as an American style attack on the right to unionize. What was seen as bad legislation for Canada, is now being presented as good policy for Manitoba.

Past experience in British Columbia tells us that Bill 7 will make it harder for Manitoba workers to unionize. Will Manitobans be better off if Bill 7 becomes law and the Province has fewer unionized workers? The evidence clearly suggests not. Based on reasoned evidence, Bill 7 should never become law.

Sometimes, we need to check our instincts and let emotions take second place to reason. Bill 7 professes to restore democracy in the workplace. It is in fact an instrument of its slow demise. Manitoba deserves better. We deserve thoughtful governance that places a premium on hard evidence and discounts raw ideology with extreme prejudice. The defence of our democratic traditions demands nothing less.

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References available upon request.