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COVID-19, Austerity and an Alternative Social and Economic Policy Path for Manitoba

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Introduction

COVID-19 HAS UPENDED households, communities and countries across the globe. Manitoba, like other jurisdictions, faces significant public health, economic and social challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. While the public health challenge appeared under control in Manitoba in summer of 2020, the deep social and economic challenges persisted throughout. Into the fall and winter, Manitobans found themselves in the midst of a devastating, months long 'second wave' and challenges re-intensified. Despite an uptick in employment, and what would prove an ill-advised broad reopening of the economy over the summer (including a government 'Restart' campaign promoting Manitoba as a low COVID-risk tourist destination) the province again faced tight lockdowns and deep levels of economic hardship.

The social impact of the economic decline is magnified by its unequal distribution. Low wage precarious workers have borne the brunt of the job losses, with women, non-unionized workers, renters, and small business owners disproportionally losing their livelihoods (Cash, 2020; Grace, 2020; McCracken 2021; Winsa, 2020). White collar, higher income workers, more able to work from home, have not seen their incomes change nearly as much, if at all (Messacar et al., 2020). Precarious and racialized workers are over-represented in front line jobs deemed essential, and face elevated risk and stress associated with working through the pandemic (Bouka & Bouka, 2020; Stanford, 2020b). COVID-19 has disproportionally impacted racialized communities, whose members are facing increased discrimination during the pandemic (Manitoba, 2021e; Wherry, 2020; Wilkinson & Ogoe, 2020), while inequitably distributed COVID-19 relief further disadvantaged Indigenous communities (Hallberg & Ladner, 2020; Hill et al., 2020).

The Manitoba government was slow and stingy with economic supports compared to most other Canadian jurisdictions, and initially pursued an agenda of workforce reductions and broader austerity consistent with its pre-COVID-19 course that ultimately hindered the ability of the government to effectively respond. The government did eventually come out with some support for households, but these were criticized by many as being insufficient or not targeted at those who needed additional support. Business support programs, up until the fall second wave, were hard to access, with announced funding mostly unspent. A bias towards austerity, both past and present, ultimately left the healthcare system, including personal care homes, underprepared and overwhelmed by the second wave.

Later in the second wave, Manitoba did better with total amounts committed to the COVID recovery, but the focus very much remains on conventional infrastructure investments and supports for businesses rather than households. These policy choices are determining ultimately who will bear the heaviest and continuing burden of the crisis, with the response today impacting our ability to weather the economic recession and any future waves of the virus.

Barring significant government intervention and economic restructuring, staying on the current trajectory guarantees that economic inequality will be worsened by the crisis. Given the Canadian constitutional divisions of powers, with provinces responsible for health, education, social services, and with the lead role in labour market and economic development, provincial government policy decisions will be fundamentally important (although if the political will exists, federal leadership, pressure and funding can play a crucial role). The current Manitoba government's long standing austerity agenda and dogged commitment to fiscal conservatism in the early stages of the crisis raise concerns that the recovery path holds more of the same, leading to greater deterioration of public services that reduce inequality.

Manitobans should be actively engaged and consulted on what measures are best for recovery and how those measures will be financed. Budget and fiscal year 2020 has come and gone as an opportunity to put forward a robust vision for addressing the profound challenges facing Manitobans. While government has been well engaged with its corporate base, and has an apparatus for gathering public feedback for Budget 2021, there has been minimal meaningful engagement with public sector, labour and community stakeholders on a strategic path out of this crisis. This approach is constraining the options being considered, and is setting up Manitoba for a slow and unequitable economic recovery.

Past economic crises of this magnitude have shown that it does not need to be this way. Disasters and collective suffering can generate a renewed sense of solidarity, and a shift towards collective well-being. This opportunity will not likely be seized without pressure from community, civil society and labour organizations. This report contextualizes and presents Manitoba-specific policy alternatives to austerity that could form part of such an advocacy agenda. Section 1 sets the stage by reviewing the economic and political context in the lead up to the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting how the last five years in Manitoba have been marked by government-imposed austerity, and how that approach weakened Manitoba's preparedness for the current crisis and future recovery. Section 2 reviews the public health response by the Manitoba government to the COVID-19 pandemic and briefly recaps expert and stakeholder assessments of the response. Section 3 presents the short term economic data for Manitoba released to date since the onset of the crisis, along with projections of recovery, highlighting the magnitude of the crisis. Section 4 summarizes the response of the Province of Manitoba to date and how it compares to the response in other jurisdictions. Section 5 reviews national and international calls by economists and public policy experts for an extraordinary and comprehensive socio-economic policy response to deal with the persisting economic devastation of the COVID-19 crisis, and puts forward a set of policy alternatives both for the immediate circumstances as well as the longer term economic recovery. Section 6 makes the case for the importance of including broader civil society organizations in discussions on how to rebuild and finance the costs associated with the recession.

Much of this report is an account of both the pre-crisis austerity in Manitoba and the restrained approach to economic and social supports during the COVID-19 pandemic. Readers most interested in the alternative policy proposals to this agenda can skip ahead to Section 5.

1. The Manitoba Pre-Crisis Political and Economic Context of Austerity

Since the election of the Progressive Conservative (PC) government in 2016, Manitoba's fiscal focus has been on an austerity agenda (see textbox) aimed at reducing provincial government expenditures, paired with a commitment to cutting taxes (Hajer, 2019a). Inheriting a sizable $932 million deficit from the previous NDP government, the PCs instituted a rapid constriction on government spending growth. This was accomplished by proposing very modest increases in the budget, while significantly underspending each year, with health spending for example falling approximately three per cent in inflation adjusted terms between 2016 and 2018.[1] Infrastructure spending was also rapidly curtailed, based on a similar strategy of underspending (Brodbeck, 2019).

The rapid contraction of provincial government spending unsurprisingly coincided with falling economic growth and job market performance in Manitoba relative to Canada as a whole (Hajer, 2020a). Manitoba's economy, measured in real terms per year, grew approximately half a percentage point more than Canada's from 2012–2016, but from 2017–2019 Manitoba's annual growth rate was 0.7 percentage points below national levels (Statistics

Defining and Justifying Austerity

Austerity is an approach to government fiscal policy centered on lowering government deficits and debt — usually measured relative to the size of the economy or Gross Domestic Product (GDP) — by reducing public expenditures. Some definitions of austerity include tax increases aimed at reducing the debt or deficit, but proponents of austerity usually emphasize expenditure reductions, based on an assumption that tax increases hurt economic growth by hurting business and consumer confidence (Alesina et al., 2019).

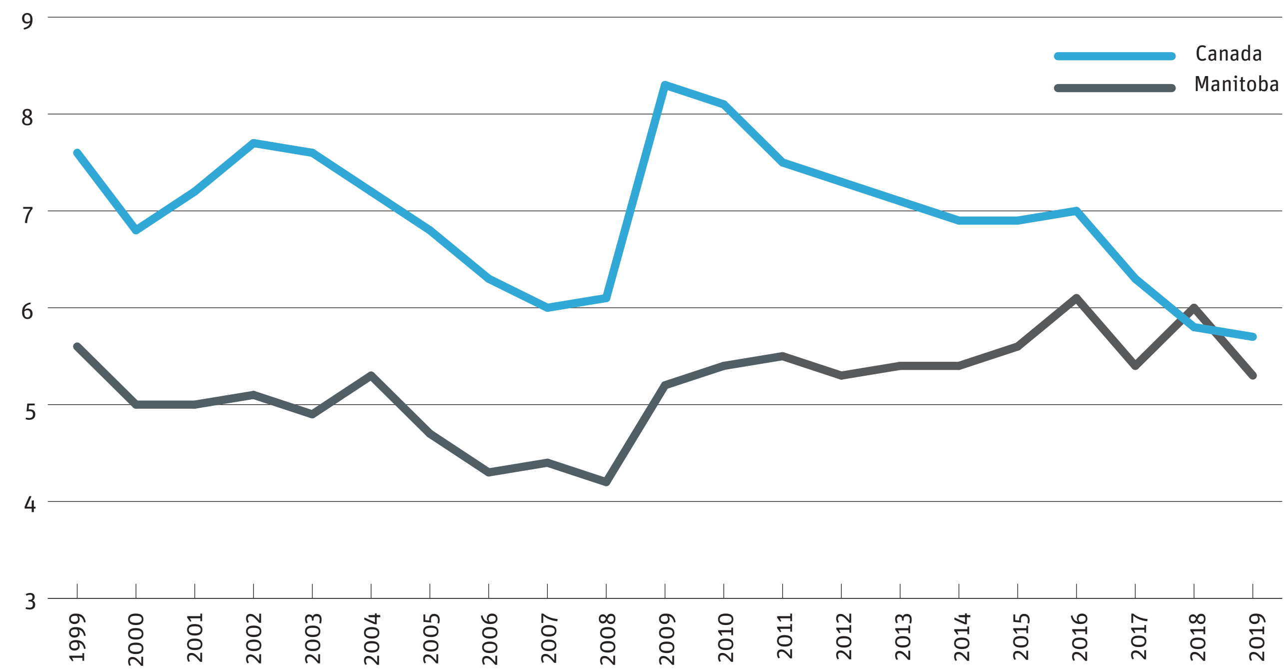
The relationship between austerity and taxes is complex. In practice, austerity is more often implemented by governing parties prioritizing the interests of corporations and higher income earners. Tax increases under austerity then, if they do occur, usually take the form of regressive user fees and regressive taxes, such as consumption taxes (Evans et al., 2018, p. 59; Graefe & Ouimet, 2018, p. 167), that disproportionally burden workers and lower income populations. In practice however, pro-austerity governments and their backers generally compulsively pursue tax cuts. Premature tax cuts and the lost revenue, leading to structural deficits, are often used to rationalize further spending cuts and fuel austerity narratives, as has been the case in Manitoba.

The claimed purpose of austerity by proponents is to increase business and consumer confidence by reducing the expected tax burden associated with repayment of debt, freeing up capital for productive private sector investment, and improving work incentives by reducing government transfers (Alesina et al., 2019).[2] These theories are based on neoclassical economic theory, and within this framework "expansionary austerity" (Alesina et al., 2019, p. 5) is possible, where government expenditure cuts generate economic growth, even in the short run.

Critics highlight how expenditure cuts may end up undermining austerity's claimed objective of reducing debt as a proportion of GDP (Blyth, 2015; McBride & Evans, 2017). By cutting government spending, demand for goods and services falls and directly reduces economic activity. In a recession where demand is already low, this further reduction creates the potential for a negative feedback loop of additional jobs losses and falling demand. Cuts to government investments in infrastructure, health, and education also hurt the productive capacity of the economy. These factors can result in GDP falling proportionally more than government debt, increasing the overall public debt burden. Austerity has also been linked to rising inequality and reduced growth (Ostry et al., 2016), and the rise of racialized nationalism (Krugman, 2019), despite the welfare costs of carrying public debt being relatively low compare to the benefits (Blanchard, 2019).

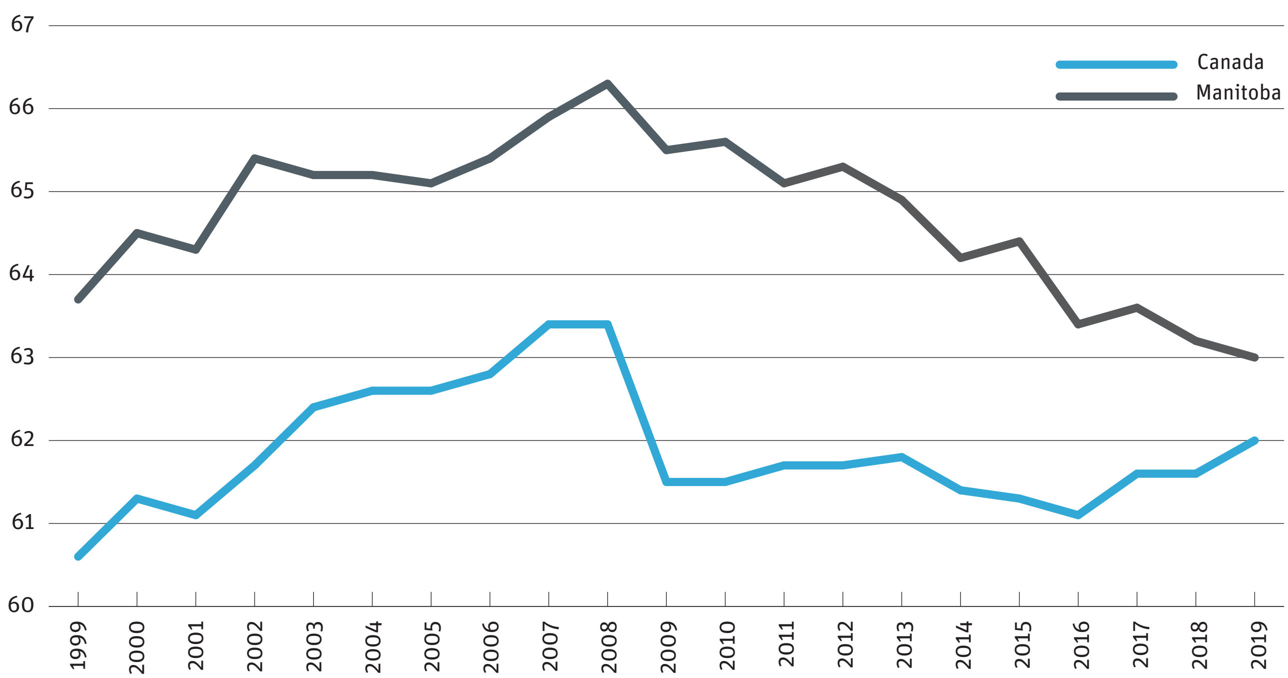
Why would austerity be pursued if such consequences are likely? More encompassing definitions of austerity provide some insights. Blyth (2015) for examples notes austerity's goals include "the reduction of prices, wages and public expenditure to restore competitiveness" (p.2). In addition to deficit and debt reduction, McBride and Evans (2017) note that austerity packages generally include "flexibilization of the labour force and public sector restructuring… through such instruments as privatizing public services, reducing public subsidies, reforming disability and illness insurance, extending the period of working life before pensions can be accessed, reducing employment benefits, and ending short-work-time programs" (p.8). These measures weaken the bargaining power of workers and reinforce the leverage of employers and wealth, improving profitability. So, while austerity may not significantly reduce the debt burden, it may still be favoured by the well-off and their political affiliates.

FIGURE 1 Unemployment Rate (%) Yearly, Population Aged 15 and Older



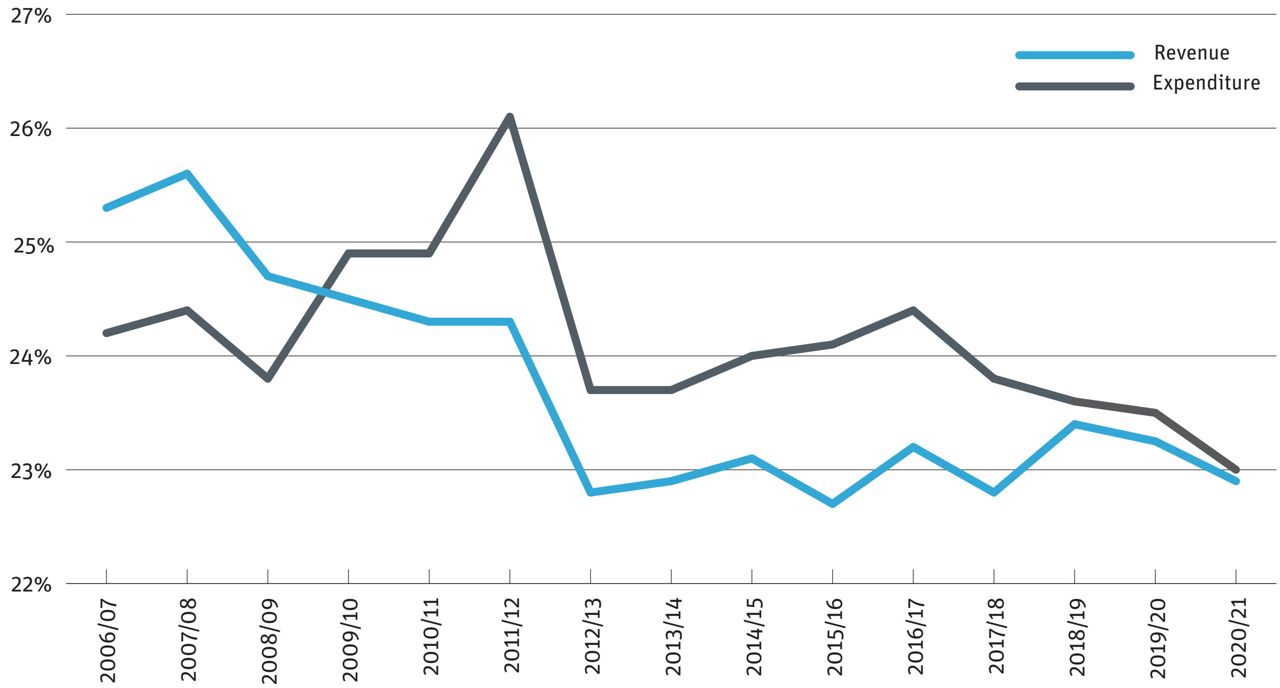
Source Statistics Canada (2020a)

FIGURE 2 Employment Rate (%) Yearly, Population Aged 15 and Older



Source Statistics Canada (2020a)

FIGURE 3 Government of Manitoba Revenue and Expenditure as % of GDP, (Projections as of Budget 2020, pre-COVID-19)



Source Province of Manitoba budget documents, multiple years (Manitoba, 2020a).
Note 2019/20 and 2020/21 are forecasted and budgeted amounts as of Budget 2020, respectively.

Canada, 2020c). Manitoba also saw a historic advantage in unemployment rates disappear between 2016 and 2019, and advantages in employment rates narrow significantly (see Figures 1 and 2).

In 2019, the auditor general declared that according to public sector accounting standards, the province had eliminated the deficit in the 2018/19 fiscal year (Kusch & Botelho-Urbanski, 2019), a remarkable feat given the size of the deficit three years earlier.[3] This deficit reduction was all the more remarkable given that it was accomplished while pursuing tax cuts, starting with the PC's first budget. These cuts included increasing the basic personal exemptions and tax bracket levels, leading to a cumulative revenue loss of over $100 million per year by 2020.[4] The government also cut the provincial sales tax in July of 2019, with a forecasted revenue loss of $1.36 billion between 2019 and 2024 (Manitoba, 2019). These reductions reinforced a large decline in revenues relative to the size of the Manitoba economy from approximately 25 per cent in the mid-late 2000s, to approximately 23 per cent in the late 2010s (see *Figure 3*), despite significant recent increases in federal transfer payments (Lambert, 2019). The significant loss of revenue resulting from the tax cuts served to justify more spending cuts and fueled the push for austerity.

Austerity and Reforms in Healthcare

Austerity, particularly in healthcare, has been highlighted as hindering the ability of governments to respond to COVID-19 in some of the hardest hit countries, including, Italy (Gabbuti & Zamponi, 2020), Spain (Hedgecoe, 2020), the United Kingdom (Costello, 2020), and the United States (Ludwig, 2020). Similar concerns exist for Canadian provinces. For example, Anthony Dale, president and chief executive of the Ontario Hospital Association stated that: "the state of semi-permanent austerity, 100-per-cent-plus occupancy and very intensive work environments… has undermined our ability to respond"(Payne, 2020).[5] Quebec is similarly coming off of multi-year austerity in health (Derfel, 2019), and Alberta's efforts to reduce physician pay has been highlighted by doctors as a distraction from the COVID-19 fight, and has recently taken the province to court over the matter, with doctors beginning to leave Alberta in search of better working conditions (French, 2020b; Herring, 2020; Rieger, 2020)

Two and a half years ago Manitoba undertook rapid restructuring and reforms aimed at containing healthcare costs which raise similar concerns regarding the capacity of Manitoba's healthcare system to respond to the current crisis. In March of 2017, a blanket directive to health agencies in Manitoba led to 15 per cent cuts in management staffing, including the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) and the Additions Foundation of Manitoba, despite facing an urgent public health crisis related to opioids and methamphetamine use (Canadian Press, 2018). This resulted in nearly 200 positions being eliminated in healthcare administration in Manitoba (Glowacki, 2017).

In April of 2017, the province launched into a massive restructuring of Manitoba's healthcare system titled Manitoba's Health System Transformation, in response to a report by private consultant Dr. David Peachey (2017). The announced goal of the strategy was greater coordination within the healthcare system, but cost reductions were also noted by senior health administrators, along with the expectation that "this will be large and it will be disruptive to our staff" (Annable & Bernhardt, 2017). While the strategy was multifaceted and involved greater centralization within a new Shared Health entity, the greatest public-facing change was the closure of three of six

Winnipeg emergency rooms (two to be converted to non-emergency urgent care centers), and the closure of an existing urgent care centre.

In July 2017, the WRHA, in response to direction from government to find $83 million in cuts (Annable, 2017a), announced the shutting down of four out of five of Winnipeg's Quick Care clinics, the elimination of lactation and audiology specialists, the closure of rural emergency medical service stations, and the privatization of outpatient physio and occupational therapy for adults (CBC News, 2017a; MacLean, 2017). Closure of the Mature Women's Centre at the Victoria Hospital was called "an assault on women's health" by a staff member (Sanders, 2017). In the fall these closures were followed by the partial privatization of home care services (CBC News, 2017b). Further administrative reductions were launched in 2018, with projected savings of $60 to $200 million (Froese & Kavanagh, 2018).

Manitoba's top-down Healthcare Transformation Strategy, according to healthcare staff, has alienated healthcare professionals, resulting in significant vacancies and declining service levels. The changes resulted in the deletion of hundreds of position in 2017, with reports that "morale on the units is at an all-time low" and of changes generating "widespread anxiety that has impacted staff attendance and patient care" (Brohman, 2017). In 2019, Dr. Peachey was hired by Manitoba to provide an evaluation of the progress to date on the transformation strategy focussed on the Winnipeg Health Authority. Despite expressing confidence in the overall vision and value of the exercise, the report (Peachey, 2019) highlighted a "shortage of readily available emergency department beds" leading to a ""stack-up" of patients", and longer "wait times and lengths-of-stay" (p.26). Peachey noted that "workload and staffing instability… are significant and not sustainable" (p.3) and "deep-seated unhappiness in emergency department nurses and physicians" (p.26), with nurses more generally facing previously "unknown levels of stress, exacerbated by a mixture of unpredictability and under-resourcing" (p.25) due to the amalgamations. The report recommended that the consolidation should be "paused immediately while the underpinning process undergoes "repair and restore" activities" (p.2). These recommendations were in stark contrast to the statement he delivered two years earlier, claiming that "things are happening rapidly but the benefits will be worth it…. It's starting to happen and nothing's going to stop this" (Geary, 2017).

Lessons are coming out of Italy, one of the countries hit earliest and hardest by the novel corona virus. Some ominous parallels exist with reforms that have been undertaken in Manitoba under the Peachey report. Italy, like Manitoba, implemented reforms based on "a highly centralized health-care system with large hospitals as its focus"(Williams, 2020) which can be efficient but can concentrate and amplify contagion. According to one Italian government official in the most affected region "for the past 20 years, the region invested heavily in hospitals… we did not make the same investment in local health services: health clinics, rehab facilities, community nursing and family doctors. And as a result, we're drowning [in the epidemic]" (Williams, 2020).

Similarly, in Manitoba, some have blamed austerity in healthcare for Manitoba's ultimately poor performance when it came to grappling with the impact of COVID-19, in particular its nation leading infection rates, multiple devastating outbreaks in personal care homes and other healthcare settings, and bottlenecks in testing capacity during the fall of 2020 (Lett, 2020d).

Broader Undermining of Governance and Service Capacity

Prior to the coronavirus crisis, aggressive reduction targets were also applied to the broader civil service and crown corporations, setting targets for eight per cent management cuts (CBC News, 2017c). The government significantly overachieved on its reduction targets, eliminating approximately 2,500 positions between 2016 and 2020 in the civil service (Lambert, 2019; Manitoba Civil Service Commission, 2020), a reduction of approximately 18.5 per cent of the civil service workforce. On top of this many positions are vacant — for example, the Department of Families had a vacancy rate of nearly 25 per cent in March of 2020 (Sanders, 2021b). Crown corporations were also given multiple annual 15 per cent management reduction targets (Froese, 2019). These reductions took place regardless of the specific services delivered or the efficiency of existing operations, a strategy noted by experts at odds with effective management practices (Annable, 2017a). The government simultaneously implemented a wage freeze that further hindered the public sector and lead to real wage decreases (Guard, 2020).

Since 2016, across the spectrum of government service provision there have been resource reductions in inflation adjusted terms. Education expenditures were frozen or below inflation (Forbes & Clark, 2020). In the area of housing supports, there has been reductions to the Rent Assist benefit, cuts to public housing maintenance and repair budgets, and an active effort to sell off and devolve the administration of Manitoba public housing stock (MacKinnon, 2020). Broader provincial austerity measures and reduction in public services have disproportionally burdened those most in need of support, including persons with disabilities (MacPherson, 2020). The provincial policy infrastructure supporting seniors was downloaded and downsized (Funk, 2020). Provincially-funded service-providing non-profit organizations ranging from neighbourhood renewal corporations to women's centres to conservation groups have seen grant funding reduced in the lead up to and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Frankel, 2020). The Neighbourhoods Alive! program was eliminated, with funding reallocated to a new province wide program, making it harder for low-income communities to access resources (MacKinnon, 2019). Infrastructure spending has seen a rapid contraction relative to the previous government, with associated negative economic impacts and likely has contributed to Manitoba's declining economic performance relative to other provinces (Hajer, 2020a).

A number of academics and public policy experts have suggested provincial cuts and austerity has likely hindered the ability of Manitoba to respond to the COVID-19 public health crisis and the evolving economic fallout (Guard, 2020; Lett, 2020d; K. Levasseur & Turnbull, 2020; Thomas, 2020b).

2. COVID-19 and the Public Health Response in Manitoba

MANITOBA WAS FORTUNATE to have had relatively low infection rates early on, with commentators pointing to geographic isolation, a school spring break scheduled for after the pandemic was declared, and luck, in addition to rapidly implementing public health and physical distancing measures (Kives, 2020b; Lavoie et al., 2020). This head start gave Manitoba the time to enhance capacity in healthcare to respond to the crisis.

Early Health Response Well-received

The Manitoba government began testing for COVID-19 in January, had an incident command centre established by February, and declared a province-wide state of emergency March 20th, 2020. Through a series of public health orders under the authority of the Public Health Act, hospital and personal care home visits were limited, non-essential services were required to shut down and social distancing measures were mandated. On March 23rd, schools were also closed, prior to evidence of community transmission taking place. Personal care home workers were also restricted to working at a single facility to avoid potentially spreading the virus (Kives, 2020a). These early steps likely contributed to Manitoba's relative success in containing infection during the first wave (Lavoie et al., 2020).

Although much of these would be later reimbursed through the federal Safe Restart agreement (Canada, 2020; Macdonald, 2020), large commitments were announced early by the government of Manitoba to support various health related expenditures, including procuring $400M in personal protective equipment and other medical supplies in early April (Manitoba, 2020l). Later in June $358 million for other health expenditures including expenditures on personal care homes and "digital health initiatives" was announced (Manitoba, 2020y). Private childcare for emergency workers, consisting of $18 million in grants for early childhood educators to offer childcare in their homes, $7.6 million for licensed centres to provide care for a limited number of children of front-line and essential workers, and $2 million for capital grants for child-care providers to safety protocols was provided (Briere, 2020; Prentice, 2020a).

The province also announced a mental health therapy program costing $4.5 million for a private company to provide online cognitive behavioural therapy, with two academics and clinical psychologists concluding that "overall, the Province of Manitoba has had a strong response to supporting the mental health of essential workers during the emergence of COVID-19 in Manitoba" (Mota & Reynolds, 2020, p. 202). Overall, Manitobans were generally supportive of the aggressive public health approach taken by the provincial government in the first wave of the pandemic (Thomas, 2020a), and a more recent analysis suggests that Manitoba is covering the highest percentage of COVID-19 health expenditures of any province (Macdonald, 2021, p. 35).

Criticisms

There were however criticisms. The government's response in some cases appeared driven by ideology. Whenever possible it contracted private for-profit operators, for example when it came to contract tracing, supports for healthcare workers, and expanded mental health supports, despite the public and non-profit sectors being better positioned to respond effectively (Frankel, 2020; Prentice, 2020a). Private online mental health supports were not encompassing enough to effectively support at risk groups, for example - parents with young children (Cameron & Roos, 2020, p. 196). Public health and wellness services relied upon by lower income populations remained closed without accessible alternatives while private services were allowed to open (Erickson, 2020). The province was also criticized by unions for missing and inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE), forcing unions to fight publicly with the government to secure proper PPE for nurses and other healthcare staff and workers who had to use expired equipment (Coubrough, 2020; Guard, 2020). Homecare and other services for disabled seniors were also cut due to a lack of PPE, while other provinces were increasing support (Driedger, 2020; Funk, 2020). This was despite nation leading levels of PPE expenditures being announced, with much of it not publicly accounted for, raising questions as to whether these committed funds were actually being spent, the degree to which faulty PPE was purchased, and where the PPE was going (McCracken, 2020a).

Bold Reopening and Lack of Preparation for Second Wave

Early on the government of Manitoba aimed and succeeded at being one of the first in loosening COVID public health restrictions in May of 2020, with a more ambitious plan than its counterparts (Geary, 2020; Winnipeg Free Press, 2020b). By the summer of 2020 the Government of Manitoba appeared satisfied that the worst of the pandemic risk had passed. A campaign to attract tourists to Manitoba was launched in July, co-sponsored by the provincial crown corporation, Travel Manitoba, with the Premier's support (Petz, 2020). One week later the province announced a $2.5 million commitment to promote Winnipeg as the Canadian Football League host hub city for the 2020–2021 season (Bernhardt & Kives, 2020). August 12th, the provincial government launched the Restart Manitoba advertising campaign with a budget of $425,000, to "restart our economy and reopen our communities" (Manitoba, 2020ae), reported by media as a campaign "to promote the loosening of pandemic restrictions" (Kives, 2020d).

These ambitious steps towards reopening did not go uncriticised. Some business owners suggested in May 2020 that it was too soon and unsafe to be opening (Lam, 2020), while public health experts advised caution (Thompson, 2020) and the Prime Minister warned provinces against premature reopening (Nickel, 2020). Later in May, nearly half of Manitobans in a public opinion survey thought that the province was moving too quickly (Thorpe, 2020a). Manitoba Liberal leader Dougald Lamont quipped that the CFL bid was "not an 'event attraction' strategy" but "a 'COVID attraction' strategy"(Bernhardt & Kives, 2020), and suggested the Restart Manitoba campaign was a bad call "when we could be facing a second wave [of COVID-19 cases] in the fall" (Kives, 2020c).

With lockdowns eased and people spending more time indoors, many feared a second wave would arise in the fall (Flanagan, 2020). The 1918 Spanish Flu followed a similar course, with an initial spring onset and a more severe onset in the fall (Glowacki, 2020). Manitoba's head start, success to date and other advantages had given the health system the time to prepare, initially suggesting that the pre-crisis and ongoing austerity in health would not be a defining hindrance to battling a second wave, partially because the resources and capacity had been mobilized and were on call (Sanders & Kusch, 2020).

Unfortunately, these predictions did not come to pass. Manitoba's infection rate increased from an average daily case count of 10 between April and September to 248 over the following three months (Manitoba, 2021a). The "fall COVID-19 surge" saw Manitoba with the highest new infection rates in Canada, leading to an eventual November lockdown that saw the banning of the in person sale of non-essential goods and a downgrading of economic growth projections for Manitoba (Kives, 2020f; Rounce & Levasseur, 2020). This lockdown persisted into January of 2021 when restrictions began to be gradually relaxed, with the sale of non-essential good being permitted (Froese, 2021).

Forced Lockdown

It was not until a letter to Health Minister Cameron Friesen, signed by 18 Manitoba physicians, was publicly released, that the November lockdown was eventually imposed. The letter noted that a lockdown should have occurred much earlier based on infection tracking data, and Manitoba was already "well past the stage where even a robust community response will significantly slow the epidemic" (Hoye, 2020). A survey released by the Manitoba Association of Nursing Professionals in January 2021 suggested that the government was systematically unprepared for the second wave of the crisis and continued to sideline the advice and expertise of frontline healthcare professionals (LeTourneau, 2021).

As in the first wave, it was the vulnerable populations that were most greatly impacted. The province also saw dozens of outbreaks in institutional settings. First Nations and Indigenous Manitobans were and continue to be disproportionally impacted (Malone, 2021), along with frontline precariously employed workers. At least two outbreaks occurred at meat processing plants, including a poultry plant in Steinbach and a Brandon pork facility (Arnason, 2020), an industry notoriously reliant on precariously employed foreign workers. Workers at the pork processing plant claimed working conditions were unsafe and asked the government to shut down the plant, to no avail (Macyshon & Jones, 2020). Manitoba experienced multiple outbreaks in personal care homes, resulting in a series of deaths being announced on a near daily basis, with questions being raised as to why Manitoba, with its extensive lead-time and the common knowledge nationally of personal care home vulnerability, was underprepared (S. Harris, 2020). In total, as of January 2021, Manitoba saw 40 personal care home outbreaks, seven assisted living facility outbreaks, and eight outbreaks in prisons (Unger, 2021), including "Canada's worst outbreak so far in a federal penitentiary", now subject to a class action lawsuit (Pauls, 2021).

Throughout the second wave, lack of preparedness and penny-pinching hindered the public health response. The government had shut down the COVID-19 response centre in June and only reactivated it when daily case counts were nearing 500 at the end of October. This move, along with understaffing and a lack of reliance on the province's Emergency Management Organization, was criticized by emergency management professionals as contributing to the weak response to the second wave (Sanderson, 2020; Thorpe, 2020c) and later, delays in vaccination roll out (Sanders, 2021a). Testing centres were also shut down and had operating hours reduced. When the widely predicted fall surge arrived, lack of testing capacity in September led to half-day waits at testing stations and conflicts with area residents due to lack of proper washroom facilities (Froese, 2020c). The shortage of testing capacity persisted for at least a month, despite the availability of both federal government funds and personnel (Froese, 2020d; Kives, 2020e, 2020g). Contract tracing was also significantly delayed, further undermining the pandemic mitigation strategy (Grabish, 2020).

Shortly after the lockdown was initiated, 200 doctors and academic health experts released a letter emphasizing that government underspending and fiscal constraints were hindering the ability of health care professionals to expand testing capacity and limit the spread of the virus (see textbox). Instead, the provincial government initially emphasized volunteer recruitment to expand testing capacity and punitive enforcement of public gathering limits and closures (Lambert, 2020b). Personal care home outbreaks were attributed to a lack of provincial support to address staffing issues (Brodbeck, 2021). Years of austerity and indiscriminate cuts to Manitoba's healthcare system were also noted as a contributing factor to the poor response (Lett, 2020d).

The Harmful Impact of Austerity on COVID-19 Response: Excerpts from Letter Signed by 200 Manitoba Physicians and Health Expert PhDs

Dated November 1st, 2020

Dr. Brent Roussin [Manitoba's Chief Provincial Public Health Officer] has neither the budget nor the resources to adequately protect our population from this virus. It is clear that public health is overwhelmed, lacks the power to complete timely contact tracing, and is unable to provide timely results because testing capacity has been overwhelmed. Public Health is also hampered by a communication strategy that suggests they lack the resources to meaningfully educate our public....

Public Health needs emergency allocation of financial resources for contact tracing, public education, and other critical personnel needs. Redeployment is not enough: they must be able to hire new staff. We are hearing countless stories about delayed followup and communication failures, and they are hampering the rest of our efforts, as well as the public's ability to protect themselves....

Emergency financial resources must be allocated towards increase our testing capacity and turnaround...

We realize that these suggestions require enormous financial commitments. However, the virus makes not only the rules but determines the budget required to control it. Attempting to penny pinch and balance the budget will backfire and will cost us far more in both the short and the long term.

Source Bernhardt (2020)

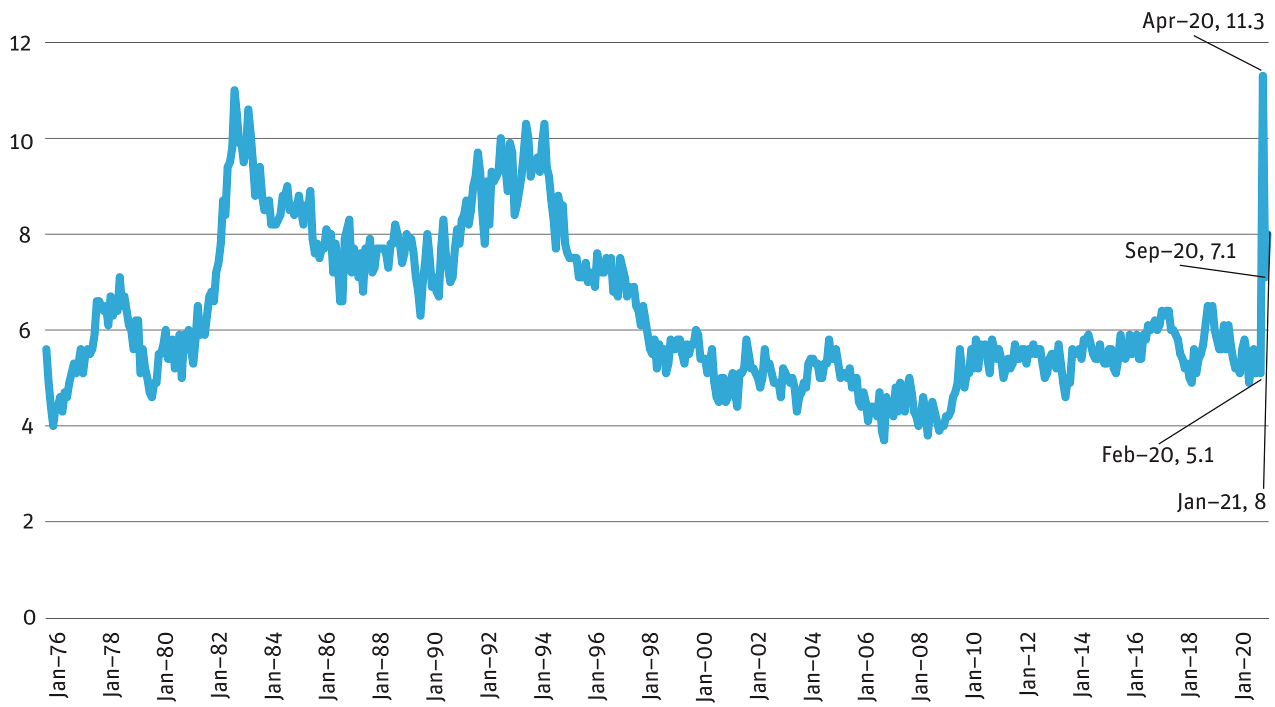
3. The Economic Impact of the Crisis

Initially attacked as a public health emergency, governments across the globe took unprecedented but necessary measures to reduce contagion and save lives, including shutting down entire sectors of economic and social activity. COVID-19's deep and immediate contractionary impact on the global, national and local economies forced many workplaces to shut down and led to job losses comparable to the Great Depression, except dramatically faster (Stanford, 2020b).

Impact in Manitoba

Manitoba was no exception, and these measures continue to loom large over everyday life in early 2021. Manitoba was relatively successful in containing and reducing the number of infections during the first wave, and removed restrictions sooner than other provinces, with a temporary recovery of lost jobs by the end of the summer. The provincial economy was again set off track by the second wave, but now better prepared, the economic impact was not as intense as during the first wave. As of February 2021, physical distancing measures persisted, travel restrictions were still in place, and many types of economic activity remained furloughed for the foreseeable future. Even as formal restrictions are once again eased, understandable hesitancy, lost

FIGURE 4 Unemployment Rate (%) Manitoba, Monthly, Population Aged 15 and Older



Source Statistics Canada (2020e)

income and mixed messaging and policy inconsistencies will likely leave many skeptical and at home. Manitoba and other jurisdictions are at best in the midst of a protracted and phased economic recovery.

The COVID-19 pandemic and response has had demand and supply effects on the economy that reduced output and government revenues (Baragar, 2020; Nikiforos, 2020).[6] COVID-19 did increase demand for some products and services, with a few sectors and some specific goods and services experiencing a boost in demand for products and services, leading to higher demand and profits; overall however there was a significant reduction in total demand for goods and services, as people self-isolated and abided by social distancing directives (Baragar, 2020; Sousa et al., 2020). Layoffs in various Manitoba industries including restaurants (Brass, 2020), airlines (Lindsay & Brown, 2020), the arts (King et al., 2020) and family medicine (Lett, 2020a) caused workers to lose earnings and reduce their spending. Concerns over safety, self-isolation, school closures and lack of child care measures led to fewer workers being available, reducing Manitoba ability to produce goods and services. These economic impacts were concentrated in the first wave, but have continued to act as a drag on employment and economic growth.

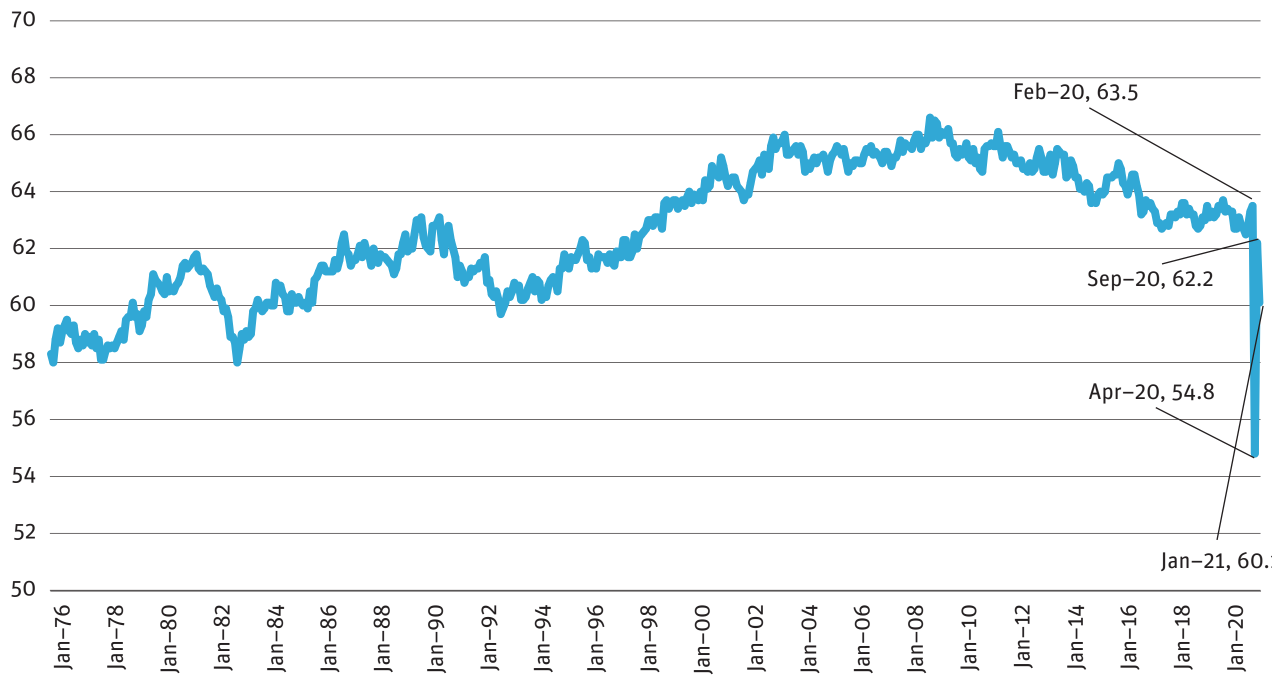
Labour market data released by Statistics Canada depicts an unprecedented collapse in employment and short term economic output. As shown in *Figure 4*, between February and May 2020, the unemployment rate more than doubled from 5.1 to 11.3 per cent, with an additional 39,500 people without jobs actively seeking work. This is the highest rate on record using modern methods, although comparable rates were reached in the recession of the early 1980s. Although the unemployment rate fell to seven per cent in September, it has remained well above pre-crisis rates high rates and was eight per cent as of January 2021.

In the current crisis, women in Manitoba faced an even higher unemployment rate of 12.5 percent in the spring of 2020.[7] The youth unemployment rate (aged 15 to 24) also more than doubled, to 24.7 per cent. The unemployment rates for women and youth followed a similar trend as the overall rate, remaining stubbornly high at 9.4 and 18.9 per cent respectively as of January 2021. Monthly labour force statistics released do not break down data based on race/ethnicity, but based on new Statistics Canada data, and earlier data coming out of the US, and the fact that racialized groups are generally over represented in unemployment and precarious work, it is likely the case that these communities are also faring worse than average. Landed immigrants in Manitoba have experienced a higher than average unemployment rate, despite having similar unemployment rates prior to the crisis (Statistics Canada, 2021f).

Looking at the official unemployment rate, however, understates the employment impact, as it only accounts for people who are actively seeking work; it does not count those who are not looking for work due to dismal prospects or those who can't work, for example, due to lack of child care. A more direct assessment of the impact can be obtained by looking at the fall in employment. Between February and May 2020, Manitoba saw employment fall by an estimated 90,300 jobs, a 14 percent drop in the number of people with jobs (Statistics Canada, 2020f).

Figure 5 shows the drop in the employment rate for the Manitoba population, down to record setting lows of just under 55 percent in April 2020. The summer recovery still had employment rates 1.3 percentage points below the pre-crisis rate, and as of January 2021, the employment rate was just 60.1 per cent, 2.2 percentage points below February 2020. Women's employment rates were even further behind, 4.4 percentage points below February's, at 54.7 per cent, equivalent to pre-COVID levels not seen since the mid-1990s. As with the COVID-19 related unemployment, these job losses were not equally distributed. Manitobans aged 15–24 make up only approximately

FIGURE 5 Employment Rate (%) Manitoba, Monthly, Population Aged 15 and Older



Source Statistics Canada (2020e)

16 percent of the population, but in January 2021 were burdened with 56 per cent of the remaining job losses. Women were also disproportionality impacted, bearing 60 per cent of the remaining losses.

Looking directly at employment data underestimates the short term impact of the crisis, as those who technically still have a job but are furloughed at home are counted as employed. In May 2020, approximately 21,300 more workers in Manitoba were employed but worked zero hours at their main job, compared to February 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2020d).

Loss of paid work is associated with a number of detrimental economic and social consequences. Besides the immediate reduction in income and the potential inability to purchase the basic necessities of life, longer term unemployment is associated with future reductions in income and success in the labour market, health status and longevity (Abraham et al., 2019; Couch et al., 2013; Farré et al., 2018; Paul & Moser, 2009). Precarious work also is associated with low incomes and negative health impacts (Han et al., 2017; Lewchuk et al., 2008; Ojala & Pyöriä, 2019; Vives et al., 2013). Reversing the trend of increasingly precarious work and responding to the historic and likely long term unemployment generated by the COVID-19 crisis is imperative to addressing broader social wellbeing in Manitoba.

Economy Remains in Recession

With consumers saving much of their income and demand challenges remaining, the Conference Board of Canada's November 2020 Outlook is estimating an annual reduction in Manitoba's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2020 of 6.2 per cent percent, the largest one-time drop on record using modern methods, and expects Manitoba to be third last nationally in growth in 2021.[8]

In early 2021, with an extended vaccine rollout underway and new variants of COVID-19 emerging, Manitoba continues to be in a state of uncertainty. It remains unclear when COVID will be under control and when we'll see a return to 'normal' from a public health perspective. The impact of COVID-19 will then continue to restrain both incomes and production for an extended period, presenting an ongoing and equally difficult challenge that will not be solved with containment of the virus.

4. The Manitoba Economic and Broader Social Policy Response

THE MANITOBA GOVERNMENT'S economic and broader social policy responses have rolled out in multiple stages. The early economic measures took the form of tax deferrals and tax cuts, as opposed to flat rate benefits that have played a more central role federally and in other provinces. This was combined with a push for new and aggressive austerity measures in parts of the public sector not directly related to health. This initial response was intensively and broadly criticized. The government eventually relented and began a series of incremental actions to increase support, although the scope and access to benefits was constrained. The change of course into a summer 'recovery' mode shifted the government's rhetoric from one of austerity to a new set of announcements to guide the economy back to some sort of normal, only to be derailed by the fall second wave. Below we review the evolution of Manitoba's (non-health) social and economic response and place it in the broader context of the Manitoba government's ongoing austerity agenda, but first we review briefly why governments need to respond not just to the public health emergency but the broader resulting economic crisis, and the role of the provincial government.

Why Governments Need to Respond

Governments intervene in crises such as the current economic downturn to avoid a prolonged depression. Since everyone's spending is someone else's income, when a business fails or a job is lost, the income of others also falls. This can lead to additional job losses and business failures. When occurring on a provincial, national or global scale, this vicious cycle of job loss and business failures can continue and cause much damage. For this reason, governments intervene in recessions to keep incomes and spending up, to minimize job loss and business failures.

Governments use 'fiscal policy', incurring deficits to increase spending and stimulate economic activity. National governments with a sovereign currency and central bank also have the ability to use 'monetary policy' to lower interest rates and use others means to create liquidity in financial markets, mobilize resources and stimulate spending. Monetary and fiscal stimulus works particularly well when there is high unemployment and businesses are producing much below their potential due to low demand for their products and services.[9] Under these conditions, new spending stimulated by government measures has a high 'multiplier' effect, generating more economic activity over and above the initial spending, creating a positive feedback loop to help combat the recession.

If people and business don't want to, or cannot borrow, governments need to rely at least partially on fiscal policy, and this requires the government to increase spending, paid for by taking on debt. Most economists believe that the government will need to pay back the debt. Smart government spending can grow the economy, generating extra tax revenue and improving the capacity of the government and economy to repay the debt. Crisis-related income supports can save money by helping to stabilize households, avoiding costly social problems such as homelessness, school disruptions for children, and health problems. Similarly, longer term stimulus investments in infrastructure and new public services can improve the productive capacity of society and quality of life.

Federal Government Response

Based on these ideas, the federal government has pursued aggressive monetary and fiscal policy since the onset of the COVID-19 economic crisis. Employment losses were unprecedented, but the federal government response to COVID-19 was equally unprecedented and matched the scale of the crisis.[10]

The federal government has been active and engaged in providing an evolving set of assistance and stimulus programs for Canadians in a relatively short period of time.

The federal government stepped in with robust income replacement programs for those with low and lost labour income, the most prominent being the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). The CERB provided $2,000 a month to those who had stopped working involuntarily due to the pandemic and had at least $5,000 in earnings in 2019 or in the year before applying. The program has been an improvement over traditional EI benefits.

As of October 2020, 278,360 Manitobans had received the CERB benefit (Canada, 2021). A parallel student program, the Canada Emergency Student Benefit was also introduced. There was also a number of support programs introduced as complements and/or successors to the CERB including the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit, and the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, which covered up to 85 per cent of wage costs.

Existing programs were also enhanced. The Canada Child Benefit and the GST Credit saw one time increases, with the GST rebate on average providing $400 for singles and $600 for couples, and Canada Child Benefit providing $300 per child. These were important measures to help low income families, including those who did not have enough formal paid work to qualify for the other federal emergency measures. Employment Insurance benefits were also enhanced. There were multiple support programs for targeted populations and service areas including housing, women's shelters, Indigenous communities, healthcare expenses, PPE, and pay enhancement for essential workers. The Bank of Canada also took extraordinary steps to support liquidity in financial markets and keep interest rates low. The overall result has been a robust stock market, an active housing market, and real disposable household income in Canada forecasted to increase in 2020 by nine per cent relative to 2019 (Conference Board of Canada, 2020).

The large role played by the federal government has been appropriate, as the federal government has more tools at its disposable and had greater fiscal flexibility to respond in a strategic fashion. Overall, the direct income supports provided by Canada have been large, broad-based and progressive, with the federal government successful in maintaining incomes in 2020 and avoiding an even deeper recession. Remarkably, disposable incomes *increased* in 2020 for lower income populations due to the transfers (Statistics Canada, 2021g). This has been primarily due to their flat rate nature, leading to a greater income replacement rate for lower income people. The federal government also committed early and again recently to stimulus measures such as infrastructure spending to support economic recovery in the medium term (K. Harris, 2020b; Rabson, 2020).

Why Provinces Need to Respond

Social programs are delivered at both the federal and provincial levels. Historically the federal government has taken the lead in broad-based, entitlement-type income security measures (Mulvale, 2020). These include contribution-based social insurance programs such as Employment Insurance (EI) and Canada Pension Plan (CPP). It also includes redistributive programs targeted primarily at seniors and families with children, such as Old Age Security / Guaranteed Income Supplement and the Canada Child Benefit. There are also some supplemental income supports such as the GST credit and the Canada Workers Benefit. These programs are broadly available to the Canadian population based on income and/or past employment.

Cash social assistance or 'welfare' is delivered at the provincial level (except for on reserve). Unlike federal government income support programs, social assistance (called Employment and Income Assistance in Manitoba) is a provincial program of last resort and is more difficult to access. In addition to being low income, one must prove destitution to qualify. Provinces are also the lead on social and affordable housing, which is rationed based on its limited supply. Provincial governments then are especially important in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable, specifically those without recent formal paid work history. In recognition of provincial responsibilities, the federal government has provided large increases to transfers during the pandemic, with Manitoba reporting an additional $675 million in December 2020 (Manitoba, 2020ak).

Those on non-employment fixed-income, including social assistance recipients, students, seniors and others without children have had very little direct federal income support, beyond modest one-time payments. But ongoing costs for households went up rapidly during the pandemic and continue to increase (Bergen, 2021). For example, food banks are under pressure and low cost food is harder to access (Canadian Press, 2020; Loriggio, 2020). Low income parents on social assistance with children at home are expected to have the technology and equipment to complete home learning assignments, and have struggled to keep up with home schooling requirements and costs (Macintosh, 2020b, 2020a), as have newcomers to Manitoba whose first language may not be that of their child's school instruction (Macintosh, 2020d).

In addition to social assistance and social housing, provinces also have important jurisdictional responsibility with respect to economic development, infrastructure provision, labour markets, and healthcare. This decentralized federal system has led to a variety of responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Provinces have been universally responsive on the public health and healthcare measures, but there is much greater variation in economic and social supports. Manitoba, especially initially, was one of the least generous provinces.

Initial Measures (March to mid-April 2020)

The first major policy opportunity to respond to COVID-19 was the 2020 Provincial Budget which had been completed before the pandemic hit. The Manitoba government chose to leave the budget mostly as it was and released a "COVID-19 Emergency Supplement" that only superficially modified the response to the emerging coronavirus pandemic (See textbox). The 2020 budget did very little to help the situation, and outlined a continuation of the pre-pandemic austerity agenda that would compound the challenges to be faced by frontline workers and vulnerable Manitobans. Signature announcements included a PST cut, a made in Manitoba carbon levy to replace the federal levy, and continued deficit reduction and saving in the fiscal stabilization account (Manitoba, 2020b). Like previous tax cuts of the Manitoba government, the new cuts proposed benefited the well-off while doing little for low income and working class families, and were not to be implemented for months. Some measures proposed, such as the Made in Manitoba carbon levy swap and the selling of social housing, hurt lower income Manitobans who were already the most vulnerable (Bernas & MacKinnon, 2019; Hajer, 2020b). Cuts to health and safety officers, while problematic in good times, were particularly unwise in the middle of a pandemic (Manitoba Federation of Labour, 2020).

The rapidly evolving pandemic and economic crisis quickly began to derail plans laid out in Budget 2020, and within a week the PST cut, and new carbon levy were cancelled, the province was predicting a $4.8 billion COVID-related increase to the deficit (Kusch, 2020c), and previously unannounced COVID-19 related support measures were launched. The first measures in late March included the launch of the Help Next Door Manitoba App to help connect volunteers to people isolated at home who needed help

Budget 2020: Status Quo in a Time of Crisis

The introduction of Manitoba's 2020 Budget was originally scheduled for March 11th. Opposition filibustering delayed the budget approximately a week. This was in response to the government tabling a number of unrelated bills on budget day, with the opposition accusing the government of pushing through a hidden agenda (Kusch, 2020a). When the budget was eventually tabled, the rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic had completely changed the underlying economic fundamentals the budget was drafted upon.

This delay could have prompted a rethinking and restructuring of spending priorities and tax measures, and specific budget measures could have been developed in response to the unveiling crisis to mitigate both the health and economic impacts. Other provinces, such as Alberta, amended their budget to increase health spending by $500 million (French, 2020a); this did not happen in Manitoba. The budget was presented March 19th, as originally prepared, with an accompanying document noting preliminary projected impacts on healthcare cost and lost revenues.

Within the budget's COVID-19 emergency supplement was a v-shape recovery graph, with a highly optimistic bottoming out at 1.5 per cent GDP contraction in the first quarter of 2020, recovery starting in the second quarter, and the province predicting annual growth of 0.6 per cent for 2020 (Kusch, 2020b). For comparison, US banks were predicting on March 20th that the US economy would shrink by as much as 24 per cent in the second quarter of this year (Stewart, 2020), and annual growth rates for 2020 as low as -1.5 per cent. Current forecasts for Manitoba confirm that these were overly optimistic projections (see Section 2).

The 2020 budget continued an austerity approach aimed at constraining the growth of public services and expenditures, while undermining the revenues of the province by reducing tax rates (Hajer, 2019b). Later the government re-profiled previously announced tax cuts as COVID support measures (Manitoba, 2020ag). The government claimed Budget 2020 to be "the most emergency-ready financial plan in Manitoba's history" emphasizing the province's reduced deficit and the rebuilding of the rainy day fund, officially known as the fiscal stabilization account (Sanders, 2020).[11]

While it is true that a reduced deficit in theory creates more spending space for the government to react with additional spending to address the healthcare and economic consequences of COVID-19, the tradeoff has been a compromised public sector, hindering its ability to respond to the pandemic, and weakened economic potential overall. Given the manageable debt levels of Manitoba (and other provinces), they key issue was not so much the 'fiscal space' but whether the government was willing to undertake the scale of response necessary. Budget 2020's emphasis on deficit reduction and the fund was no more than an acknowledgment that it had no concrete budgetary plans to respond to the pandemic.

getting groceries and other assistance with errands (Manitoba, 2020c), and the postponements of eviction hearings and a rent freeze (Manitoba, 2020d).

In early April a number of measures were announced as part of the Manitoba Protection Plan to reduce costs for businesses and households, including waiving interest and penalties and deferring due dates for taxes and payments to government entities including Manitoba Hydro, Manitoba Public Insurance, Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries, school divisions, and the Workers' Compensation Board (Manitoba, 2020e). The Manitoba Protection Plan also included an accelerated removal of the PST on property insurance at a cost of of $75 million and $1.2 million to support additional shelter beds for those experiencing homelessness. The province also partnered with the federal government on a commercial rent assistance program, committing nearly $15.9 million, although this cost was later revised downwards to $5 million (Manitoba, 2020ai & 2020al).

In mid-April a $5 million COVID-19 research fund was announced for healthcare related research, along with a program to allow exposed asymptomatic front-line healthcare workers to self-isolate with pay as required (Manitoba, 2020f, 2020g). Support for local production of needed medical supplies, private childcare grants and a service to connect to federal emergency business supports were also launched (Manitoba, 2020h).

Doubling Down on Austerity and Weakness of Initial Social and Economic Supports

In the early phases of the pandemic, parallel to the announcement of the above measures, the government was also pursing aggressive and renewed austerity in non-healthcare related areas of government service delivery, calling on the broader public sector to engage in massive cuts, to supposedly free up resources to divert towards health care expenditure related to the crisis (Baragar, 2020). In a widely circulated and referenced presentation by the Treasury Board Secretariat to public sector leaders in April 2020, the government asked the broader public sector to come up with $500 million dollars in cuts to labour costs, on top of another $750 million of targeted expenditure reductions within the provincial government (Treasury Board Secretariat, 2020). This included across-the-board cuts of 10 per cent to provincially funded non-profits, deemed unessential, that were struggling to meet increased community demands due to COVID-19 (Plaut, 2020a). Part of this strategy included furloughing public sector workers for 2–3 days per week for four months and asking the federal government to partially compensate workers (Hajer & Fernandez, 2020a). These calls for cuts, up to 30 per cent of government department budgets, were paired with early and repeated prioritization of the fiscal impact of the crisis on provincial government debt and the Premier calling upon the federal government to take steps to reduce borrowing rates for provinces (Baragar, 2020; Froese, 2020a).

The aggressive austerity approach pursed by Premier Pallister and the Manitoba government early in the pandemic was unique amongst Canadian provinces, with only Alberta's Jason Kenney pursuing similar "share the pain" cuts (Guard, 2020, p. 64). The approach was broadly criticized as clearly counter to standard economic theory, exacerbating the economic crisis and working against the extensive efforts of the federal government to support incomes and maintain employment during the crisis (Au, 2020; Hajer & Fernandez, 2020a; Lett, 2020b; MacKinnon & Syrie, 2020). Economists highlighted how these cuts were particularly inappropriate, especially given that the rainy day fund and deficit financing provided better options given record low interest rates and manageable existing provincial debt burden (Baragar, 2020; Hajer & Fernandez, 2020a). We estimated that if pursued as announced, the cuts would lead to a loss of labour income in Manitoba of $981 million to $1.179 billion, $157 to $189 million less in tax revenue, and a $1.3 to $1.5 billion loss in economic activity (Hajer & Fernandez, 2020b). More generally, the pandemic was used as an opportunity and cover for an aggressive series of cuts to services deemed non-essential consistent with the neoliberal ideology of the governing Progressive Conservatives (Frankel, 2020). As summarized later by one economist (Baragar, 2020, p.79):

> The decision not to launch a large initiative encompassing income assistance programs, additional loans and wage subsidies for businesses, and even direct public-sector job creation programs to help fill in employment gaps while the economy was going through its phased reopening would appear to have been driven primarily by political and ideological preferences, rather than by hard economic constraints.

The state of emergency gave the province broader latitude to act quickly and decisively, but the government was slow and conservative, despite leading Canadian public economists noting the importance of a rapid response (Milligan, 2020). More generally, the province provided only minimal supports and left it up to the federal government to address the non-health related the needs of households and businesses, despite many options available to bolster income supports, employment and business sustainability throughout the crisis (Baragar, 2020).

Table 1 presents a comparison of Manitoba's actions to support households as of mid-April 2020 versus that of the provincial government of British Columbia. BC had one of the more robust early responses to the crisis, with

TABLE 1 COVID-19 Social and Economic Supports for Households: British Columbia vs. Manitoba as of mid-April 2020

British Columbia	Manitoba
• Moratorium on evictions and freeze on increasing rents.	• Moratorium on evictions and freeze on increasing rents.
• 900 spaces for homeless or living in communal locations	• 140 new shelter beds for homeless.
• Temporary Renter Supplement directly to landlords $300–$500 per month.	• No direct income supports for renters.
• BC Hydro service disconnections due to non-payment ceased, rates reduced by 1per cent, and one-time credit equivalent to three months for those losing income due to COVID-19.	• Manitoba Hydro and Manitoba Public Insurance to not charge interest or penalties; Hydro and Gas cuts-offs ceased.
• $1,000 one-time for those who qualify for federal CERB.	• No direct income supports.
• Climate Action Tax Credit one time increase $174.50 per adult and $51 per child.	• Accelerated removal PST from property insurance.
• Targeted 25 per cent reduction in the total property tax bill, including a 50 per cent reduction in the provincial portion of property tax.	• Deferred penalties and interest on unpaid provincial (school) property taxes, encouraged municipalities to do same.
• $50 million in seniors' supports through community agencies.	• Web-based application to connect those in need to volunteer assistance. Ten per cent cuts to public service and external organizations deemed unessential.
• Free bus trips in Metro Vancouver.	• No additional support for transit.
• $3 million for food banks.	• No announced new support for food banks.
• Measures to increase safe illicit drug supply.	• Continued opposition to safe injection sites.
• Let income assistance recipients keep CERB without reduction.	• Clawback of CERB from EIA recipients.
• Extra funding estimated to cover ¾ of operating costs (700 per cent increase) child care centres	• Grants for private child care for essential health workers. No additional support for existing child care centres.

Sources Lee (2020) and Lee & Hamidian (2020).

Sources Baragar (2020), Cooper and Hajer (2020), Guard (2020), Mulvale (2020), Prentice (2020a) and Province of Manitoba (2020aa).

BC committing $5 billion by mid-April to supports, including direct payments to households with extra support for renters, utility rate reductions and public transit fare elimination, and significant support for child care facilities (Lee, 2020; Lee & Hamidian, 2020). Manitoba on the other hand at this point had provided no direct income supports to households (or businesses), left parents and child care centers to effectively fend for themselves (Prentice, 2020), and used the crisis to engage in cuts due to an aversion to debt and deficits. Not only did the province provide only minimal relief to businesses and households, but the Premier publicly criticized the federal government's efforts, expressing disdain for benefits paid to households because they generated disincentives for people to seek or return to paid work (Winnipeg Free Press, 2020c). This was despite the fact that Manitoba had one of the lowest minimum wages in the country (Hajer & Smirl, 2020), schools were closed, parents faced limited childcare options, and that many businesses were shutdown, resulting in record unemployment.

The province put forward the provincial debt and deficit as the greatest threat to be addressed. The government clung to the claim that the government was facing a $5 billion deficit, despite early analysis that suggested this was excessive (Hajer & Fernandez, 2020b), with the Premier making false claims exaggerating Manitoba's relative debt position to other provinces (J. Levasseur, 2020).[12] This, along with the pursuit of long standing controversial legislative priorities that would adversely affect crown corporations, the Public Utility Board, and public sector workers during the crisis (Fernandez, 2020b), led to a growing sentiment that the Premier cared much more about his legacy as a deficit slayer and government downsizer than the wellbeing of Manitobans (Lett, 2020c).[13]

The austerity approach pursued in March and April 2020 was widely criticized publicly by the business sector, university administrators, professors of finance and economics, unions, and even conservative columnists and a Progressive Conservative party activist (Au, 2020; Brodbeck, 2020; Forbes, 2020; Gamey & Silver, 2020; MacKinnon & Syrie, 2020; Riley, 2020). Premier Pallister also achieved the lowest approval ratings of any Premier in the first poll after COVID-19 hit (Gowriluk, 2020), a position he has maintained throughout the pandemic (Naylor, 2020; Unger, 2020), despite Manitoba's early success in keeping case counts low.

In the end the public sector staff reductions did not reach anywhere near the scale initially proposed, with the government claiming to have found enough savings in annual non-essential workforce labour costs (CBC News, 2020a; Guard, 2020). The core civil service ended up having to take five unpaid days off, although a number of layoffs did occur in the broader public sector, including: 200 in Manitoba Hydro, even though Manitoba Hydro funds are not transferable outside of the crown (Froese, 2020b); at least 50 non-faculty university support staff despite soaring workloads and increased enrollments (Guard, 2020); and a dozen workers at the Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation, with remaining workers facing additional unpaid days office (Manitoba Government and General Employees Union, 2020). Schools also announced layoffs of approximately 2,800 staff (Crow-SpreadingWings, 2020; Macintosh, 2020c). Municipalities left with minimal provincial support, balanced budget requirements and an inability to run deficits, were also forced to cut their workforce, with the City of Winnipeg eventually having to lay off nearly 700 employees after early efforts to retain and redeploy them (Moore, 2020).

Back-tracking Austerity, Continued Critique (Mid-April to September)

The province did eventually announce additional support programs for some households and businesses, and the broader economy (Manitoba, 2020al). *Table 2* lists the series of new (unbudgeted) non-health spending measures to address the broader social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, from mid-April up until September.[14] During this period, the province announced commitments of approximately $310 million in supports for business, $186 million for households, and $594 million for the broader economy, with $500 million of that being for physical infrastructure investment. In total, the province committed over $1 billion in additional spending over this period for these supports.

The above shows that after the early months of the pandemic the province did ease up significantly on its austerity agenda, least in its public facing communications. In addition to the new spending commitments, the June 2020 Fiscal and Economic Update marked a rhetorical reversal of the early aggressive austerity demands and focus on debt and deficits. The June update had no reference to the size of the deficit, instead it emphasized Manitoba's high level of pandemic response spending, stating that "there is only one way out of this economic challenge: grow the economy" (Manitoba, 2020z, p. 21). The Premier was similarly quoted in the new release: "Growing our way out of this pandemic financial hole is the only way forward, which is why our government is focused on getting Manitobans back to work, and restarting our economy" (Manitoba, 2020aa).

Despite this, throughout the spring, summer and into the fall, the province faced ongoing criticism regarding the appropriateness of the programs launched, and narrow eligibility criteria and subsequent lack of uptake, particularly for business support and wage subsidy programs. The few income supports came after prolonged criticism of the government's lack of action (Baragar, 2020; Forbes, 2020; Winnipeg Free Press, 2020a) and have been criticized as poorly targeted and politically driven (Lambert, 2020a), or insufficient (CBC News, 2020b). Supports that were offered were criticized again for inappropriately prioritizing the for-profit private sector over public and non-profit options (Prentice, 2020a; Rollason, 2020). One academic highlighted the government's "striking lack of attention to women's plight" (Grace, 2020, p. 143). Overall, the province was criticized for mobilizing minimal resources to support workers displaced by the crisis, persons with disabilities, women, racialized groups, non-disabled social

TABLE 2 New Province of Manitoba Non-Health Social and Economic COVID-19 Crisis Response Announced Spending Measures, mid-April to September (Budgeted not Actual)

	Date	Amount (in millions)	Description	Source
Supports for Businesses	Apr. 21	$37	Workers Compensation commits to pay out surplus premiums collected from business.	MB (2020i)
	Apr. 22	$120	Manitoba Gap Protection Program announced, providing loans of up to $6,000, but only for businesses that did not qualify for federal government COVID relief programs.	MB (2020j)
	Apr. 23	$13	Accelerated refunds for businesses from Manitoba Public Insurance; a second round of refunds was announced in November.	MB (2020k, 2020ai, & 2020ak)
	Apr. 24	$15.9	Commercial rental assistance program cost shared with the federal government.	MB (2020ai)
	Apr. 24	$120	$7 per hour wage subsidies for hiring students.	MB (2020m)
	Apr. 27	$0.2	Online platform announced to support local agricultural producers to sell products online, cost-shared with the federal government.	MB (2020n)
	May 13	$0.4	Online initiative to support local purchasing of COVID-19 related supplies from MB manufactures. Later paid for by federal funds under the Safe Restart agreement.	MB (2020s)
	June 18	n.a.	Back to Work this Summer Program wage subsidy was announced, expanding the eligibility of the existing $120 million commitment for students to all workers; Businesses initially limited to a maximum of $5,000 for up to five workers, changed in July to a maximum of 10 workers.	MB (2020w & 2020ab)
	July 20	$3.3	Support provided for agricultural producers with PPE and workplace management through the cost-shared Canadian Agricultural Partnership program, covering up to 50 per cent of producer expenses.	MB (2020ac; Sousa et al., 2020).
	Total	**$309.8**		
Supports for Households	Apr. 23	$96.7	Accelerated refunds for households from Manitoba Public Insurance; a second round of refunds announced in November.	MB (2020k, 2020ai, &2020ak);
	May 5	$45	Seniors Economic Recovery Credit to provide $200 to every Manitoba senior.	MB (2020o)
	May 26	$4.6	One-time $200 payment for social assistance recipients in the disability category.	(MB 2020u)
	June 2	$30	Manitoba Risk Recognition Program, cost-shared with the federal government ($90 million contribution) announced, with payments of $1,377 to over 78,000 workers who worked directly with the public during the pandemic.	MB (2020v & 2020ad)
	June 15	$5.1	Home Nutrition and Learning Program to provide food to families experiencing food insecurity related to the COVID-19 crisis; the program was expanded twice. Later paid for by federal funds under the Safe Restart agreement.	MB (2020ah & 2020an).
	June 23	n.a.	Manitoba Job Restart Program, providing $2,000 to workers who voluntarily give up the Federal CERB benefit and return to work. Paid out of unspent previously announced business support and wage subsidy budgets.	MB (2020x)
	May 6	$5	Additional matching subsidies for privately fundraised bursaries were put in place for post-secondary institutions.	MB (2020p)
	Total	**$186.4**		
Supports for the Broader Economy	May 7	$500	Commitment to infrastructure, in addition to the $3 billion committed in the 2020 budget, including support for pre-existing provincial and municipal priorities, and cost-shared projects with the federal government.	MB (2020q)
	May 12	$10	Additional funding for youth jobs Green Team program expected to support 2,000 temporary jobs.	MB (2020r)
	May 20	$2	Building Sustainable Communities community development program fund increased by 25 per cent for a total of $10 million in grant funding	(MB, 2020t)

	Date	Amount (in millions)	Description	Source
	July 20	$8	#RestartMB Event Attraction Strategy launched, including $2.5 million for a CFL hub city bid.	Bernhardt, & Kives (2020)
	Aug. 24	$52	Safe restart funds for schools, cost shared with federal government ($85.4 million).	MB Teachers' Society (2021)
	Total	**572.0**		
All New Programs	**Total**	**$1,068.2**		

Note Listed amounts include new announced or committed (not necessarily spent) funding amounts, and in the case of joint federal-provincial programs, include only provincial commitments. Only new spending commitments in response to COVID-19 are included. If measures are explicitly based on reallocated previously announced funding listed or resources generated due to COVID-19 austerity directives (ex. provincially mandated cuts to education), only net new funding is listed for the additional measure.

assistance recipients, and the low income population more broadly, while cutting funding to community organizations (Driedger, 2020; Frankel, 2020; Mulvale, 2020).

Into the beginning of the second wave businesses continued criticizing support programs for being insufficient and difficult to access (Durrani, 2020b), leading to chronic undersubscription and unallocated funds. For example, the Manitoba Gap Protection program by late May had only provided businesses with $25 million of the total $120 million announced, and only $45 million by mid-July; the student recovery jobs program has also only paid out one-sixth of the $120 million nearly three months after being announced, and the broader expansion of the program in June led to only an additional $2.3 million in subsidies being paid out by mid-September (Baragar, 2020). The Commercial Rent Assistance program was also undersubscribed, with the expected cost to the province falling from over $15.9 million to $5.7 million by December 2020 (Manitoba, 2020ai).

The Manitoba Job Restart program was also criticized for not addressing the core issues faced by employers, including lack of support for the health and safety related costs of operating during the pandemic, and narrow eligibility restriction for wage subsidies; in the end the program did not come close to meeting its targeted enrollment (Mulvale, 2020). There were also accusations of the program being ideologically motivated by the Premier's opposition to the CERB, while his concern for maintaining jobs was questioned given the aggressive public sector job cuts (Mulvale, 2020), and how he ignored other reasons workers were not returning to work, including low minimum wages and the lack of benefits such as paid sick leave (Durrani, 2020a; Rebeck, 2020).

Under spending was an issue in other areas also. For example, in August, the province repackaged an earlier announced $22 million plus child care commitment, now paid for with federal funds under the Safe Restart agreement (Canada, 2020). Nearly $9.5 million was allocated to a trust, with the remainder allocated to the Manitoba Chamber of Commerce and a tax credit to support private for-profit child care, including funds for advertising (Manitoba, 2020af). As of early March 2021, only 20 per cent of the announced childcare funding had been allocated, with child care advocates urging the government to invest now in affordable, licensed child care spaces, which will remain in short supply in Manitoba once parents return to work (Sanders, 2021d). Manitoba also did not take advantage of the maximum federal funds available for the risk recognition program, missing out on $10.5 million, which would have allowed 7,000 more workers to receive the benefit (Macdonald, 2020).

Second Wave, Second Chances

With the impending November 12th lockdown in response due to Manitoba's nation leading COVID-19 case counts, the Manitoba government appeared to have taken the criticism of the business community to heart and became more willing to flow funds more liberally this time around. Just prior to the lockdown, the government announced the Manitoba Bridge Grant program for those for-profit and non-profit organizations that had to close due to the public health order. The program was based on $100 million reallocated from underspent, previously announced business support measures. There was a commitment to expand the program by an additional $100 million if the lockdown was extended past January 1st, which it was, and another $50 million for long term recovery support to be delivered by the Manitoba Chamber of Commerce. The province extended the program a third time in March for a maximum payment of $15,000 per business, which was well received by the business community (Durrani, 2021). This program was of a substantial scale, did not require matching funds or hiring, and did not exclude business that had received federal support. According to one analysis, it was the largest provincial business COVID support program launch in Canada (Macdonald, 2021).

Two programs to support employment in caring sectors were announced shortly after. On November 18th, $10 million was announced to support COVID related staffing challenges in disability services, child-care and child welfare sectors (Manitoba, 2020ao) and the following week a $18 million contribution was announced to a federal-provincial wage top-up program for support workers in personal care homes, child welfare and shelters, with the federal government contributing $17 million (Manitoba, 2020aj). On December 3rd, $1.5 million was announced for the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce for promoting businesses damaged by the pandemic (Manitoba, 2020am).

On January 8th 2021, the province announced that it had spent $180 million to date on COVID-19 business support programs (including wage subsidies), and four days later stated that $104 million had been released through the new Bridge Grant Program (Manitoba, 2021c).[15] The total announced support to date of the major business wage subsidy and grant programs totaled $390 million.[16] It appears then that under the two month closure from November to January, the province spent more on business subsidies than over the entire March to November period. The province has also been more transparent in announcing take-up rates of employer support programs with specific dollar figures on funds paid out to date (Manitoba, 2021c), in addition to totals on wage top-up programs (Manitoba, 2020ao, 2021d).

Despite the criticisms then, at least with respect to announced funding, the Province has recovered from its initial stinginess in financial commitments to COVID-19 supports relative to other provinces. It is covering the largest proportion of COVID related health expenditures (although questions remain — see Section 2), and has the second largest announced budgetary commitment to COVID-19 support and stimulus measures, based on relatively generous PPE, infrastructure and business support commitments (Macdonald, 2021). It is important to note, however that families, precarious workers and marginalized individuals were not well supported. It is also unclear how much of this committed funding will actually be spent and whether it will begin to make up for past austerity measures.

As noted in Section 1, the pre-crisis austerity of the Pallister government was a combination of modest budgeted decreases along with significant underspending of budgeted amounts, particularly in infrastructure. This has led to Manitoba leaving significant matching funding from the federal government unclaimed in areas such as health, housing, climate change mitigation, and other infrastructure, both in the years before and during the pandemic (Bernas, 2019; Froese, 2020e; Macdonald, 2021; McCracken, 2020a). While business support funding appears now to be freely flowing, the infrastructure commitment is the largest component of the overall COVID-19 spending package and it remains to be seen if this commitment will be realized in practice.

5. Policy Alternatives in Response to the COIVD-19 Economic Crisis

As the pandemic evolved, the Manitoba government did eventually give up its public calls for deep cuts from the public and non-profit sectors and its reluctance to support households, businesses and the broader economy. However, it primarily directed money to businesses and conventional infrastructure, reinforcing the status quo, and only supported workers where significant federal cost matching was available or broader essential public sector staffing needs required it. At best the government appears committed to a mitigation strategy to return the status quo as quickly as possible.

There has been no discussion of whether we should return to 'normal' or if it is even possible as we deal with a novel virus that is continuously evolving. 'Normal' involved high and rising inequality, unaddressed racism and lack of meaningful reconciliation with Indigenous communities, and an increasingly urgent climate crisis. Encouragingly, the federal government has restructured the Employment Insurance system and prioritized transformative initiatives related to child care, climate change and clean water for First Nations communities (K. Harris, 2020a). The provincial government on the other hand is putting forward no measures to systematically address the growing inequality and increasingly precarious circumstances faced by working and middle class households, worsened by the crisis, or any meaningful action on climate change appropriate to the scale of the problem. The window is open now to regroup and tackle these issues.

Alternatives to Austerity

Several progressive public policy experts and organizations in Canada have recognized the potential of the COIVD-19 pandemic as a turning point; an opportunity to reverse decades of growing inequality, inaction on climate change, and underinvestment in public social services. The federal government response to the crisis has shown that when there is political will along with parliamentary and popular pressure, resources can be mobilized (although the potential for this to be done in permanent programmatic ways has yet to be realized).

There is a growing movement recognizing that the economic recovery response needs to move beyond conventional short-term counter-recessionary stimulus packages focussed on hard infrastructure, to a long term strategy that also invests in people. For example, the economist Jim Stanford (2020a) using the analogy of rebuilding effort for Western Europe after World War II, calls for a "modern Marshall Plan" with a focus on the large scale of intervention required to address the social and climate crisis and a "willingness to use tools of direct economic management and regulation — including public service, public ownership and planning". Seth Klein (2020) makes a similar case for addressing the climate emergency, highlighting the massive reallocation of labour, the very large government debts incurred in this period, and social investment to allow the economy to outgrow these debts in relative terms. Trish Hennessy (2020) similarly calls for "a Health-in-All-Policies" approach to governance that sets aside austerity and a reliance on the market for meeting human needs. Economist Darrick Hamilton and co-authors argue that overcoming entrenched racial injustice will also require encompassing and active government intervention in stimulating and restructuring employment and a reinvestment in public services (Hamilton et al., 2021). Economists Mariana Mazzucato and Robert Skidelsky (2020), point to how the pandemic showed the clear benefit of having governments lead by acting for social protection and economic management, calling for a new "fiscal constitution", and restoring the state to its proper place as an active agent of economic management and development. They note how our advanced economies could usher in a "new era of public investment to reshape our technological, productive, and social landscape".

Naomi Klein (2020) raises the level of urgency, highlighting how finance, insurance, real estate and fossil fuel interests, and their allies in government in some cases such as in the US under President Trump, took advantage of the crisis to reduce government regulations and oversight of their activities, pillage public treasuries, and defund social welfare programs. Klein also emphasizes the transformative potential of the pandemic by exposing the weakness of existing social safety nets, while calling for government action on climate change and inequality. She points to historical examples such as US President Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal which arose from the Great Depression. Avi Lewis (2020) calls for a Green New Deal based on "zero emissions, and bringing immediate material benefits and enhanced, 21st century universal public services to everyone — prioritizing Indigenous, racialized and working class communities", with Andrew and Emma Jackson (2020) emphasizing that such a Green New Deal would be based on public equity investments as opposed to bailouts. Michael Rozworski (2020), working from a Green New Deal perspective, outlines a particularly relevant set of policy changes that could be implemented as part of a structural and transformative macroeconomic policy response at the provincial level in Canada.

The economist Robert Pollin has costed out the implication of a Green New Deal at the global level and estimates that a zero emissions strategy, by 2050, in line with the International Panel on Climate Change recommendations, is possible with an investment commitment of approximately 2.5 percent of GDP per year (Chomsky & Pollin, 2020). He suggests that this investment is achievable and should be split equally between public and private sectors, with the public sector encouraging private investment through subsides and regulatory changes. He also notes that much of this investment will "pay for itself in full over time… [through] lower energy cost for energy consumers in all regions of the world" (p.76). Economists Yeva Nersisyan and Randall Wray (2020) also suggest that we have the real resources, i.e. the economic capacity, to undertake the required investment for a Green New Deal, with appropriate government stewardship. A letter signed by 105 economists, including Nobel prize winners and top scholars at Ivy league universities, calls for a similar social, political and economic transition [see textbox], while other prominent economists have argued that it is not only urgent that a COVID-19 stimulus packages include climate change mitigation measures, it is crucial that this happen early in the recovery phase to set us up to achieve

Excerpt from Letter Signed by 105 Economists: To Rebuild our World, We Must End the Carbon Economy

From deep-rooted racism to the Covid-19 pandemic, from extreme inequality to ecological collapse, our world is facing dire and deeply interconnected emergencies. But as much as the present moment painfully underscores the weaknesses of our economic system, it also gives us the rare opportunity to reimagine it. As we seek to rebuild our world, we can and must end the carbon economy.

Even as climate breakdown looms around the corner, the pressure to return to the old carbon-based economy is real — and all the more dangerous, given the fundamental instability of an economy rooted in injustice. Sources of large-scale human suffering, such as crop failures, water shortages, rising tides, wildfires, severe weather, forced migration and pandemics, go hand-in-hand with a warming world.… When these consequences manifest, it is no accident that they are disproportionately felt by communities of color, low-income communities, the most vulnerable nations and peoples, and other historically marginalized groups.…

The carbon economy amplifies and begets racial, social and economic inequities, creating a system that is fundamentally incompatible with a stable future. If we fail to act now, the present moment may merely be a preview of what is to come, as we are forced into ever-more-painful situations and trade-offs. It is naive, moreover, to imagine that we can simply nudge the fossil fuel industry — an industry that has lied about climate change for decades, actively opposed serious climate solutions and continues to plan for a fossil fuel-dependent future — into good behavior.

Instead, we should recognize that the present moment creates an opportunity to bring about a better future for ourselves and our children. By taking on the carbon economy, we can begin charting a pathway towards economic recovery while building a fairer, more sustainable world in the process.

• Governments must actively phase out the fossil fuel industry…

• Institutions of financial power must end their fossil fuel investments and funding… [and]

• People must build political power to advocate for a fairer economic system…

By achieving a large-scale economic transformation that dismantles the carbon economy and brings about a greener world, we have an opportunity to begin the process of economic recovery while working to undo the injustices at the heart of our modern system. As the undersigned experts in economics, we call on our policymakers to recognize the role that meaningful climate action has to play in rebuilding our world — to recognize that a healthy economy and society require a healthy planet.

Source Letter signed by 105 Economists, including Jeffrey Sachs, Joseph Stiglitz, Mariana Mazzucato, Clair Brown, Indivar Dutta-Gupta, Robert Reich, Gabriel Zucman and Dani Rodrik, published in the Guardian newspaper on August 4th, 2020 (Sachs et al., 2020). .

targeted goals; otherwise legacy fossil fuel and other entrenched interests risk becoming rescued and renewed (Hepburn et al., 2020).

Below are some government policy and expenditure components being identified in these calls for action:

- A rejection of austerity, with a reliance on a renewed public sector and federal deficit financing to support investments in economic and social infrastructure, climate change mitigation and human wellbeing.
- Long term investment in public health measures including a broadening of Medicare to include services such as mental health, pharmacare, dental care, vision care and home and personal care homes for elders and the disability community.
- Support for democratic economic structures, including a greater use of public delivery, crown corporations, cooperatives and worker ownership of business enterprises.
- Access to safe, affordable and appropriate housing as a social and economic right.
- Investments in childcare, with calls for universal publicly funded and delivered childcare.
- Increased consumer protection, including capping credit card interest rates, cracking down on pay day lenders, and a public bank delivered through Canada Post.
- Renewed and expanded labour rights, facilitated through increased unionization and labour law reform, including the promotion of a living wage, paid sick days, improved workplace health and safety, and displacing low-wage precarious work with more secure and better paying jobs, particularly in essential services.
- Reconstruction of our income security systems, particularly for workers, so that benefits are accessible and respond to the needs for those unemployed and underemployed.
- Reconstructing our economies to prioritize domestic production and control of strategic and essential goods and services, for example in manufacturing and food supply, as well as publically owned laboratories for the research, development and production of vaccines.

- Introducing government supports to bring back the family farm to enhance local food production, improve working conditions and move away from industrial meat, dairy and egg production that stresses the environment and breeds pandemic-causing pathogens.
- Developing a robust set of economic stimulus and recovery options to help combat rising inequality and employ the workers that have lost their jobs.

Why We Need a Bold Socio-economic Response

Many of these analyses highlight how the pre-COVID-19 status quo was fundamentally untenable. For example, James Galbraith, writing in the US context, describes how over last 40 years there was a shift from growth based on goods production and rising wages to a more service-orientated economy and debt fueled consumption. Most consumer goods are now produced overseas and imported. What remains is "mainly advanced investment goods and services, in sectors such as aerospace, information technology, arms, oilfield services, and finance" (Galbraith, 2020). With consumer income and confidence suppressed due to ongoing uncertainty due to COVID-19 and employment prospects, consumers are reducing expenditures rapidly. Galbraith suggests that given that so much domestic production and employment is in non-essential services, the domestic economy is disproportionately vulnerable. With respect to sectors that still produce goods, he suggests global demand for oil, cars and air travel will remain suppressed for an extended period, if not permanently, and private sector residential and office construction may take a similar hit.

While Canada's economy is slightly less reliant on services, and more reliant on industry and agriculture for its economic output, a similar trajectory has been experienced here. Despite the slow reopening of the economy, businesses and jobs are not likely to simply recover to previous levels. Predictions of a third wave are already being articulated by medical professionals (Fallis, 2021). Despite rapid federal government intervention to mitigate the economic damage, high levels of unemployment persist. The pandemic will likely have negative effects on the economy long after the pandemic has passed (Fuentes & Moder, 2021; Jordà et al., 2020). Long term economic restructuring is already taking place. For example, the adoption of labour replacing technology has been accelerated during the crisis, disproportionality impacting lower-skilled low-wage racialized workers

(Aratani, 2020). This labour displacement and unemployment are clearly damaging, with the burden on those least able to cope.

These unemployed and displaced workers are an under-utilized resource, and there is no requirement that they return to the same type of employment once the crisis ends, if that is even an option. The crisis has forced societies to distinguish between the goods, services and activities that are essential to society and those that we can go without. With government leadership, these workers could be incentivized, retrained and reemployed to deliver inequality-reducing and wellbeing-enhancing public services and climate change mitigation programs. This will require an additional level of bold government intervention to coordinate all the relevant stakeholders towards a green and just economic recovery at a level we have not yet seen even at the federal level. Governments are the only institutional entities that have the power and resources to take the necessary risks and lead such a transformation (Pittis, 2021).

The need for these social investments in Manitoba was high before the pandemic magnified underlying socio-economic inequities (Grift & Cooper, 2020; Manitoba, 2021e; Plaut, 2020b). It has been low wage, racialized workers and women, over-represented in caring, service and part time work, who have lost their jobs (Grace, 2020; Macdonald, 2020; McCracken, 2021). Skills depreciation, "scarring" and student learning loss due do school closures and increased reliance on remote learning will compound, leading to the longer term economic and developmental issues for current and future workers (Fuentes & Moder, 2021; The Economist, 2020). The rapid deterioration in mental health has been striking, particularly for families (Cameron & Roos, 2020, p. 193). Front line workers, praised as heroes during the early stages of the pandemics, are again being forgotten and relegated back to increasingly precarious work environments (McArthur et al., 2020; Messing, 2020). Government can play an important leadership role in counteracting this, for all, but especially for more vulnerable families.

Manitoba-specific Policy Proposals

There is no shortage of cost-saving social infrastructure investments and climate change mitigation efforts that could be undertaken in the province. In this section we outline a series of proposals that could be undertaken at the provincial level to move forward on a Green New Deal and just transition in Manitoba. Many of these proposals have been articulated in the 2020

Manitoba Alternative Budget (Fernandez, 2020a) and Rozworski (2020), with those found in the Alternative Budget having specific expenditure proposals. Some of these can happen quickly, addressing immediate inadequacies in the provincial pandemic response, and keeping and getting people back to work safely as vaccines are rolled out in the coming months. Others can be considered strategic recovery measures that will require a longer planning and coordination horizon, which could also begin immediately.

Measures That Could Be Implemented Quickly

Pandemic Public Health Response and Worker Safety

Countries and regions have taken different approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, one can think of two general approaches that have been broadly implemented: the first is a suppression or near-zero strategy implemented in Atlantic Canada and the Northern territories, as well as in countries such as New Zealand, Australia and multiple Asian countries, that aims to get and keep the virus down to extremely low levels and eliminate community transmission; the second is a mitigation strategy such as that implemented in other Canadian provinces, and most western European countries, focused on keeping COVID-19 rates at what is deemed a manageable level, generally set in relation to acute care capacity constraints of the health care system.[17] A number of economic analyses suggest that suppression strategies are a win-win approach — lives lost are minimized and the economy in the long run does better (or at least not much worse) then under mitigation approaches (Alvelda et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2020). Surveys of economists suggest that the majority agree that prolonged strategies and half-measures have been shown to be worse or equivalent economically to more aggressive strategies in the long-run (Ilzetzki & Moll, 2020; Paine, 2020). In Canada, some public health experts and economists are publically calling for a shift to a full suppression strategy (Camfield & Chevrier, 2021; COVID Strategic Choices Group, 2020; Fallis, 2021; Morris & Mintz, 2021).

Daily case counts and test positivity rates are still well in excess of what triggered the initial spring lockdown and school closures, and likely exceed guidelines necessary for suppression strategies.[18] Despite this, as of early March, the province proceeded with continued loosing of restrictions signaling a continuing acceptance of ongoing community transmission (predictably COVID-19 cases again rose). Manitoba could return to a suppression strategy similar to the one pursued briefly in the spring of 2020, one that has been shown effective in other jurisdictions, resulting in better overall economic results, significantly lower death rates, and that would minimize the risk of a subsequent third wave and even harsher measures (Fallis, 2021).

Part of this move could entail shifting from almost an exclusive emphasis on treating COVID-19 through an individualized, community spread focus to include and prioritize an occupational health strategy approach (Feldman, 2021; Hamilton, 2021; Stanford, 2020b). The province's communications and enforcement strategy has focused almost exclusively on community and household transmission, despite the large proportion of cases arising in workplaces (Grabish, 2021a). This shift would include recognizing that COVID-19 can be transmitted through aerosolization (Alyazidi et al., 2021) and based on this, undertaking the following measures under provincial jurisdiction (Hamilton, 2021):

- Designing and enforcing new workplace health and safety standards, recognizing that current indoor social distancing practices are insufficient;
- Reversing the cuts to health and safety enforcement and hiring additional officers (Manitoba Federation of Labour, 2020);
- Upgrading workplace PPE and ventilation, prioritizing essential service workplace system and equipment upgrades such as schools, personal care homes, and other health care facilities, to cope with the current pandemic as well as future respiratory viral pandemics expected to occur with growing frequency (Alyazidi et al., 2021);
- Enforcing and supporting the right to refuse unsafe work;
- Legislated mandatory access to paid work days (Manitoba Federation of Labour, 2021; Matulewicz & Fairey, 2020);
- Presumptive coverage under workers' compensation insurance, as has been done in British Columbia (Proctor, 2021);
- Take measures so employers cannot practice 'claims suppression' when workers are injured or fall ill on the job and need to file a claim with Workers' Compensation (Fernandez, 2019);
- Ensure that all residents, particularly temporary foreign workers and undocumented workers have Manitoba Health coverage and are not prevented by employers from accessing it;

- Restore unannounced, on-site inspections by Employment Standards of work places and living accommodations of temporary foreign workers; and
- Ensure sufficient income replacement supports to ensure basic needs are met when workers cannot work due to unsafe work environments.

In addition, increased working from home has opened up space for greater worker exploitation with respect along a number of dimensions, including wages, imposed costs, and hours worked (Stanford, 2020b). These changes parallel the longstanding and growing challenges that have faced contract workers, specifically the abuse of independent contractor classification to avoid mandatory labour standards. More broadly the pandemic is compounding the growing precarity of work for a growing proportion of the population. This only increases the importance of the updating of Manitoba's labour standards legislation and enforcement to address this increased exploitation. Policy options in this area to counteract these trends, in addition to those noted above, include:

- Increasing the minimum wage to $15 per hour (Hajer & Smirl, 2020) and tying it to a living wage (Hajer et al. 2020);
- Moving towards a sectoral bargaining approach and expanding minimum wage setting by industry, with expanded subsidized apprenticeship/trades and certified occupations;
- Increased regulation, investigation and penalization of misclassification of employees as independent contractors; and
- Legislative and regulatory changes to support unionization more broadly and in targeted low-wage high-turnover sectors, including a 50 per cent card check certification system and investigating other options to make it easier for workers to form and join unions.

Investment in Public and Community Health and Wellbeing Workforce

More broadly a suppression and recovery strategy require stabilizing vulnerable households and providing resources to the public, non-profits and community agencies that support them, and ensuring they can abide by public health directives. At the provincial level, income support measures could include loosening and streamlining access to social welfare programs including:

- Making the Rent Assist program more generous and accessible by:
  - Extending access to low income homeowners;
  - Making the benefit more generous by reversing benefit cuts that have occurred since 2016 (lowering the deductible rate back to 25 per cent of income and using a 1-bedroom apartment rent as baseline for all single person households); and
  - Developing a process for admitting applicants based on a short term collapse in income (Cooper et al., 2020).

- Making it easier for Manitobans to apply for and be accepted into the Employment and Income Assistance program (EIA).
  - The counting of the CERB as earned income, and the subsequent reduction in EIA benefits and in some cases lost eligibility has caused great instability (May, 2020). A strategy is required for reenrolling these households, restoring benefits, and providing amnesty from repayment of EIA benefits due to accepting the CERB.
  - In the medium term, EIA could be transitioned to a livable basic needs benefit (Fernandez, 2020a) and delivered in a similar manner or in conjunction with Rent Assist as an income-tested entitlement-based program, similar to the Canada Child Benefit on the basis of a 'basic income' approach.

Policy alternatives to better support public sector and non-profit workers providing essential services include:

- Renewed and increased funding to support the safe community-based delivery of essential health and wellbeing services and spaces for seniors, women, persons with disabilities, low income and the precariously sheltered populations, including funding for improving wages and terms of employment for workers (Dobchuk-Land & Maier, 2020; Grift & Cooper, 2020; McCracken, 2021). This could include:
  - Transitioning low-wage contracted-out health and social service jobs to public sector employment, with a goal of transitioning part-time precarious work into full time stable jobs, starting with home care and personal care home staff.
  - Adopting a Living Wage policy for all provincial government employees, contractors and public sector non-profits delivering provincially funded public services; and
  - Returning to a multi-year and more stable funding model for provincially funded non-profit organizations (Frankel & Levasseur, 2016; MacKinnon, 2017).

- Providing targeted increased expansion of services for needs compounded by the crisis, such as domestic violence prevention support (McCracken, 2021).

- Instead of providing one-time emergency grants and risk recognition pay, respecting the collective bargaining process by accepting the court ruling that the government wage freeze has been unconstitutional (Thorpe, 2020b), and allow workers to negotiate wage increases at least in line with cost of living.

Monitoring and shoring up front-line service providers as federal emergency funding is withdrawn will be crucial to ensure that services are maintained at the high level of ongoing need compounded by the pandemic.

Strategic Recovery Measures

In addition to shorter term policy changes, larger scale strategic public sector stimulus and investment will be required to address both the current economic downturn and the longer term social challenges of high inequality and climate change. Federal government programs helped stabilize incomes for many who lost their jobs, and these programs, along with increasing home values, have even reduced disparities in wealth and income (Statistics Canada, 2021g), but this is primarily due to the unprecedented deficit-financed income transfers from the public to the private sector. On the production side of the economy, things remain depressed. Recent statistics confirmed that the Canadian economy in 2020 contracted at the highest rate ever recorded using modern methods, by 5.4 per cent, and that as of December 2020, GDP in Canada was still three per cent below its pre-pandemic level (Statistics Canada, 2021h). The current crisis is a critical inflection point with the opportunity to re-orientate provincial economic development and mobilize Manitoba's unemployed and discouraged workers towards meeting unmet social and environments needs.

Climate Change Mitigation

Manitoba's Climate Action Team (2021) has published a comprehensive set of measures under its recently released strategy *Manitoba's Road to Resilience: A Community Climate Action Pathway to a Fossil Fuel Free Future*. This strategy provides an ambitious climate change mitigation strategy to help meet greenhouse gas reduction obligations, save consumers money and create good jobs, providing "a pathway to full decarbonization in Manitoba - zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050" (p.8). A number of provincial government policy levers are available to mobilize such a strategy. To meet these objectives would require subsidies and systematic government-led (as opposed to dispersed and uncoordinated consumer- and producer- led) implementation strategies, with targets and timelines to:

- Undertake home and business energy retrofits (Fernandez, 2020a);
- Build and expand green energy use, production and distribution infrastructure, including solar, geothermal and electric vehicle charging stations;
- Transition from fossil fuel inputs and unsustainable high-tillage agricultural practices and support adoption of regenerative agriculture and smaller scale, locally owned production and processing;
- Promotion of local, sustainable agriculture, with linkages to local consumers and broader Community Economic Development goals, in line with calls for greater food sovereignty and food security the crisis (Sousa et al., 2020), including reversing the regressive changes to the crown lands program (Fernandez, 2020a);
- Transition from fossil fuel powered to electrified transportation of people and goods, with a decrease reliance on private passenger vehicle ownership to public transit and shared ownership models, with the public sector taking the lead by transitioning all new car, truck and bus purchases to electric (Fernandez, 2020a);
- Build the infrastructure for and incentivize active transportation and use of electrified public transit, including the provision of dedicated/separated cycling infrastructure and free or low cost public transit options (Fernandez, 2020a);
- Increased protection and management of wilderness through additional conservation areas and provincial parks, along with proper maintenance and infrastructure to ensure Manitobans' renewed interest in provincial parks is accommodated in a sustainable way; and
- Support tele-commuting and virtual meeting, working and learning upgrades including ensure high speed internet access for remote communities.

This strategy will require updated legislation and regulations for development and construction standards, to ensure new development is:

- Pursuing low energy need through high density development;
- Rejecting the expansion of legacy fossil fuel networks, such as natural gas heating, and instead pursuing network green energy alternatives such as geothermal;
- Built adopting more stringent energy efficiency standards compatible with a zero emissions target; and

Creating good jobs targeted at those facing the highest need will require government leadership and coordination with training institutions, social enterprises, and the private sector to ensure that skill and labour requirements for a zero emission strategy are met and draw upon Manitoba's young and growing workforce, and particularly fast growing demographics such as Indigenous communities in Manitoba (Deane & Szabo, 2020).

Governments' record low borrowing rates could be leveraged to provide low cost finance to households, business, and producers to finance private investments in targeted actions. For example, the government could relaunch and expand the Manitoba Hydro's PAYS program to finance energy efficiency and green energy upgrades to residential and commercial buildings through energy savings on hydro and natural gas bills. The government could also build on existing agricultural financing programs with a targeted financing mechanism to support transition away from fossil fuel heavy inputs, no/low till regenerative agricultural methods.

More broadly, such a transition would benefit from the power of the provincial government to engage directly in economic activity through taking equity stakes in green enterprises and to creating and using its crown corporations to implement this vision. Provincial crown corporations generate good jobs, keep profits and investment local, and help ensure development objectives are tied to democratically set priorities while reducing greenhouse gases and reducing poverty (Fernandez, 2015). For example, the mandate of Manitoba Hydro could be adapted or new crown corporations could be formed to pursue additional green energy development and help supply high speed internet access to remote communities. Instead, the current government is limiting and shutting down crown corporations and agencies, including profitable Hydro subsidiaries, and ceding ground to politically aligned private sector interests (Hajer & Keith, 2018; Kusch, 2020d; Petz et al., 2021), with pending legislation and a recent consultant's report signaling loss of public oversight and possible privatization (Fernandez, 2020c).

Social Infrastructure

After years of underspending, the Government of Manitoba has made a robust commitment to conventional infrastructure spending as part of their recovery package. Given the province's $11 billion infrastructure deficit, and the power of infrastructure spending to create jobs (Fernandez, 2020a, p. 97) this commitment is welcome but will not get very far in addressing the need. Compared with the recovery spending that is required to address the deficit and economic downturn more broadly, additional investments are required.

The current infrastructure commitment to date also has very little of the transformative vision required to meaningfully contribute to climate change mitigation or broader social needs. Instead, that commitment is focused on conventional investments in roads, bridges and water and waste infrastructure, and, in the case of personal care homes, fire suppressions systems and visiting shelters as opposed to expanding and improving care (Landrum, 2020). It is also not clear that the construction and engineering sectors are the only or most appropriate sectors for mobilizing the target populations that have most acutely been burdened by the increase in unemployment.

There exist a number of alternative investments strategies that could address social needs directly and help build resiliency through greater social equality and by addressing the social determinants of health, including new investments in healthcare, housing, childcare, education and broadening economic democracy.

Expanding Universal Health Services

Many health services are currently insufficiently available or excluded from coverage under Manitoba Health's public health insurance system. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of an accessible public healthcare system that does not discriminate based on ability to pay. Reducing barriers to accessing healthcare services and investing in preventative healthcare services can generate good jobs and improve our productive capacity and economic competitiveness as a province. Policy options to increase access to healthcare include:

- Progressively expanding public health insurance coverage to dental care, physiotherapy, vision, prescription drug coverage, mental health and more holistic healthcare services with a focus on healthy living, prevention and the social determinants of health.

- Establish personal care home access as a provincial entitlement under Manitoba health coverage, with the aim of transitioning delivery to full non-profit and public operations.
- Seek out allies in other provinces to see these services become required services provided under the Canada Health Act and aim to secure additional federal transfers to support expanded coverage.

A focus on prevention care and healthy living paired with truly universal coverage promotes equity, better health, less stress, prevents costly medical conditions, and can generate cost advantages for Manitoba employers. These services when accessible and normalized can have large social pay-offs and studies suggest that making these services broadly accessible would reduce overall health care costs in Canada (Bürge et al., 2016; CCPA & Canadian Doctors for Medicare, 2017; Chan, 2015; Lange, 2020; Thanh et al., 2020; Vasiliadis, 2018). With mental health challenges being exacerbated by the crisis (Cameron & Roos, 2020, p. 195), the persistent symptoms and long term health impacts of COVID-19 (Budson, 2020; Manitoba, 2021e; World Health Organization, 2020), and the negative social and economic impacts of the crisis being borne by those of lower socio-economic status, access to health care more broadly in Manitoba will be as important as ever. Generating employment in caring services, paired with a reskilling strategy, will help support the creation of good jobs traditionally filled primarily by women, responding to the fact that women have been disproportionally impacted by job loss during the crisis (McCracken, 2021).

Building and Sustainably Funding More Social and Affordable Housing

Safe, stable and appropriate housing is a foundational requirement for household wellbeing and success in employment and education, while overcrowding and unstable housing situations propel health and social inequities, deepening vulnerabilities and disadvantages arising from the pandemic (Cooper & Hajer, 2020; Hill et al., 2020). Instead of increasing access to affordable housing, the current Government of Manitoba, upon taking office, ceased construction of new public housing, sold off existing units and pursued a strategy to devolve provision to the private sector (MacKinnon, 2020).

Residential housing construction is a high value added, labour intensive activity with strong local economic linkages, making it a particularly good stimulus investment. Due to federal funding with provincial matching requirements Manitoba has recently committed to some new construction but this is not sufficient to meet the level and complexity of needs. Policy alternatives to support improvements to the social housing stock in Manitoba include (Cooper et al., 2020; Cooper & Hajer, 2020; Fernandez, 2020a):

- A multi-year commitment to build new social housing stock at rent-geared-to-income levels, achieved through ongoing unit based subsidies and expansion of the Rent Assist program eligibility;
- Provide existing and new social housing with long term operating subsidies to ensure that housing and on site services are sufficient to address the complex needs of targeted populations including newcomers, especially refugees, Indigenous peoples, and other populations requiring additional supports related to addictions, metal health, and disability;
- Establishing a proactive market monitoring and purchasing program to acquire and convert private residential buildings into social housing stock;
- Reinvestment in the maintenance and capital upgrades of exiting social housing stock, including long term care facilities;
- Reestablishment of the funding of small grant programs delivered at the community level to support residential improvements to private housing stock targeted towards low-income neighbourhoods and supporting seniors and persons with disabilities to remain in their homes.

Public Universal Child Care

Long standing investments and policy in Manitoba's childcare system make it more accessible than most other provinces, but it is still far away from having universal access and a well-paid, credentialed workforce. The social benefits and economic pay-offs of high quality early childhood education are well known, and Canada has a record of being international laggard compared to its peers (Alexander et al., 2017).

Manitoba's system still excludes many families (Prentice, 2020b), and early childhood educators in Manitoba are only paid about half of what teachers in the school system make (Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, 2017). The private and home-based child care being promoted by the government is hard to access and of low quality, and maintains the pay gap noted above (Prentice, 2016). Progress has been made in other provinces by incorporating early childhood education into the public school system (McCuaig, 2018).

Policy alternatives for increasing access to child care, with its attendant benefits include:

- Progressively expanding the education system, with the necessary new financial resources, to include two years of public universal preschool (i.e. full day nursery and kindergarten), to make Manitoba more comparable to international norms (Alexander et al., 2017), help professionalize the field, increase quality, and create good jobs in a field staffed primarily by women.
- Until all of child care can become a universal public service, increase funding and adopt more progressive pricing and subsidy models for the earlier years and before and after school childcare needs to increase access and quality (Prentice, 2020b).
- A strategy for upgrading and training new and existing child care educators, combined with a mandatory higher industry wage and pensions for workers, supported with increased provincial funding.

Through these investments, a universal, high quality childcare system based on credentialed, unionized early childhood educators can be an important part of an economic development and good jobs strategy (Warner & Prentice, 2013).

Restoring and Supporting Public Education

Our universal K-12 education system has the potential to be a great equalizer in our province. In addition to helping prepare our younger generations to participate actively in our communities as citizens and workers, schools act as frontline providers of other social services, including child care and monitors of child wellbeing, and in many cases as an important resource for coping with poverty and health related issues (this has been brought into clear focus by the COVID-19 crisis). The current government continues to provide schools with below-inflation increases, forcing cuts to services, and is acting to remove the autonomy and funding mechanisms on which our public school system relies. Instead, we could be increasing resources to schools in a way that reduces inequality and promotes opportunity. Policy alternatives for our school system that could be part of a just recovery include:

- Funding schools at least at above inflation rates to meet existing needs and allow for additional staff to be hired to cope with the learning loss and additional challenges created by the pandemic;
- Targeted funding for universal access to supports related to trauma, disability and poverty, including increased funding for educational assistants, specialized staff, and universal meal and nutrition programs in schools with paid staff support; and
- Dedicated funding to provide school-based, universally accessible before-and-after school extra -circular activities options for all students under 12 years old, staffed by aspiring educators and support staff, to address unequal access to recreational opportunities, simplify child care needs for parents, and create entry level jobs for youth facing record levels of unemployment.

Skills and Training

All of the above measures will require a robust and encompassing skills and education strategy to prepare Manitobans with the skills needed for the large number of new jobs. While there is some precedent in Manitoba with the previous governments Skills Strategy, Sustainable Employment Strategy (Manitoba, 2013) and First Jobs Strategy (Manitoba, 2015), the scale will need to be much larger.

The recently released Manitoba Skills, Knowledge and Talent Strategy (Manitoba, 2021b) combines long standing common sense approaches found in earlier strategies with a number of regressive changes, such as reducing apprentice supervision requirements and moving to failed pay-by-results funding models (Grabish, 2021b; Reimer, 2021). More fundamentally, the strategy has no demand side approach to increase employment and create jobs and wages, and no acknowledgment of how Manitoba's low minimum wage perpetuates low wage, low productivity business models (Hajer & Smirl, 2020). It also lacks recognition of the deep investment required if Manitoba is going to transition those who are furthest from the labour market in to good high productivity jobs.

An alternative strategy could include demand side approaches, such as the series of job creation initiatives outlined above, and meaningful investment in creating supportive workplaces that are culturally appropriate, anti-racist and inclusive of persons with disabilities, gender diversity and representative Manitoba's broadly diverse population (MacKinnon, 2015). Such a strategy will require a significant mobilization of financial resources to back up the strategy and promote accessibility. This will require:

- Zero or low tuition and support for living expenses to promote accessibility to education and training programs;
- Financial support to generate paid internship and cooperative work placements;
- A large scale up of support for employment-focused social enterprises in an expanded number of sectors. Social enterprises can support training and skill development for those facing barriers to employment, and a Labour Market Intermediary could help workers and employers with the transition into more typical employment for targeted populations (MacKinnon, 2012).
- A gender-based and intersectional approach that aims to break down barriers for workers facing exclusion and discrimination (McCracken, 2021).

Democratic Economic Institutions: Social Enterprise and Cooperative Development

The crisis has led to many business failures, which will unfortunately continue as the economic crisis persists. Under our proposed strategic approach, it will be more difficult for business models based on the exploitation of low wage precarious labour and unsustainable business practices to operate. Alternatives models could be supported through a substantial investment in worker and other cooperative business structures, along with capital funds and other community investment sources to allow coops and social enterprises to purchase business assets and resume operations. For example, existing tax credit programs such as the Employee Share Purchase Tax Credit and the CED Tax Credit could be reformed and backed up with promotional and educational business development resources to prioritize coops, and create a sister programs for nonprofits based on social capital fund for non-profit enterprises.

Support for Community Development

To support a large scale, just transition government needs large-scale, well-funded centralized programs to create the foundational support and resources to make change happen, but on the ground mobilization will be required at the neighbourhood and community level. The government could relaunch an expanded Neighbourhoods Alive! type program in communities across the province with a new additional focus on climate change, crime prevention, and youth jobs to mobilize and leverage signature government programs. This would support community-level workers to connect with and mobilize Manitobans directly and provide opportunities for residents to engage at the local level in Green New Deal — type programs and employment.

Advancing Truth and Reconciliation

As noted by Hill, Bonnycastle and Thompson (2020), First Nations and Northern communities in Manitoba lack access to services that southern and settler communities take for granted, experiencing discrimination with respect to funding for health, education and essential services and infrastructure. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the inequities, and "health care efforts… for COVID-19 have been reactive, without building long-term capacity or infrastructure in First Nations" (Hill et al., 2020, p. 102). They put forward a number of recommendations for investment including in housing, local food production, broadband and water treatment systems to promote health and education equity. Manitoba can play a role in being proactive in addition to supporting the federal government in meeting these urgent demands.

Overall First Nations and Indigenous communities and organizations already demonstrate leadership in alternative and proactive social, economic and environmental development approaches, and their partnership and expertise will be required for such strategies to succeed on a province-wide scale in Manitoba (Loney, 2016; Sengupta et al., 2015).

How to Pay for an Ambitious Just Recovery in Manitoba

Federal Transfers

The implementation of a Green New Deal style just recovery in Manitoba will require financial resources. As noted, the federal government has presented an ambitious stimulus agenda to support recovery from the crisis, with much of it requiring partnership with provincial governments. In Manitoba, these resources could be used to support an ambitious alternative development strategy, even without the federal government adopting such a visionary approach.

Deficit Financing

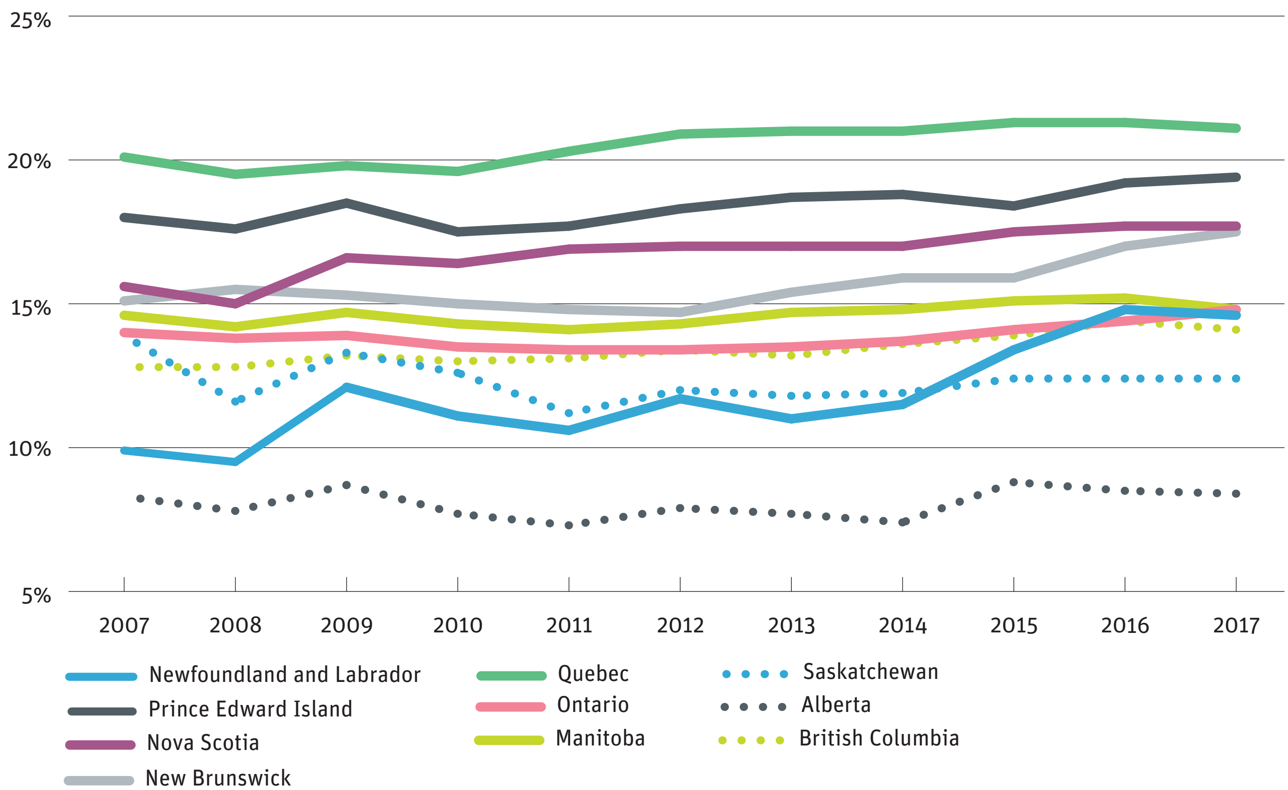
Provincial deficit financing is also an appropriate and reasonable option, particularly given the cost saving and productivity enhancing nature of many of the strategy's elements. Basic economic theory is also clear on the need for deficit spending in a deep recession such as the one we find ourselves in (see Section 4). This recession has also exacerbated social inequalities that will hurt our most marginalized for years to come. Not only do we need to spend now to boost the economy, but there are also very high needs that if addressed will have large payoffs both in productivity gains and the avoidance of costly social burdens. Using a social determinants of health perspective, "disparities-focused quality improvement interventions" (Kane, 2020, p. 20) have proven to be effective at changing the often accepted-as-fact realities of poverty, poor housing, unemployment and the negative social outcomes arising.

Prevention can save us money in the long run, but we need to take the steps necessary to invest. COVID-19 has shown that governments in advanced developed countries such as Canada can easily borrow money. Manitoba in particular is nowhere near a debt crisis (Hajer & Fernandez, 2020b), and government estimates of the deficit for 2020 continue to fall (Sanders, 2021d). In fact, despite the large increase in the deficit, forecasted expenditures on debt services in 2020–21 have *dropped* by $42 million since Budget 2020, due to record low interest rates (Manitoba, 2020al). A deficit spending approach would be consistent with the new position of the International Monetary Fund, that has highlighted how record low interest rates make austerity an inappropriate response (Giles, 2020).

New Provincial Revenues

Deficit financing can play a role in implementing needed social, environmental and economic interventions, but at the provincial level, increasing revenues could also be part of the solution, including lobbying for increased transfer payments from the federal government. As noted earlier, Manitoba

FIGURE 6 Provincial Taxes and Fees as % of GDP



Sources Author's calculations based on Statistics Canada (2021d, 2021e).

government revenues compared to the size of the economy have fallen since 2006 by approximately 2.5 points of GDP (see *Figure 3*). Part of this is because of falling federal transfer payments, but past and ongoing tax cuts have also taken their toll on revenues. Compared to other provinces, Manitoba is middle of the pack, with room to raise taxes (see *Figure 6*). Quebec for example collects the equivalent of approximately 21 per cent of GDP in taxes and fees. In Manitoba it has hovered around 15 per cent. With respect to the amount of corporate income tax relative to size of economy, Manitoba is particularly low. Contributing to this is the fact that Manitoba is the only province that does not tax the income of small businesses.

Manitoba could also improve the degree to which its tax and transfer system addresses inequality. Inequality has been increasing in Manitoba, with the after tax income of the Top 1 per cent (including capital gains) almost doubling between 1982 and 2018, from 4.1 per cent to 8 per cent in 2018 (Statistics Canada, 2021b). Manitoba's tax and transfer system also performs below average compared to other provinces with respect to how well it reduces inequality.[19] Manitoba also has the fourth lowest top marginal income tax rate at 17.4 per cent. There is room in Manitoba's tax system for an additional tax bracket or two.

Possible alternative provincial government revenue generating mechanisms for Manitoba outlined in the 2020 Manitoba Alternative Provincial Budget (Fernandez, 2020a) include:

- Increase the corporate income tax rate;
- Eliminate tax credits such the Basic Personal Amount tax credit (to fund a Livable Basic Needs benefit);
- Increasing the PST to 8 per cent;
- Increasing personal income taxes on higher income earners through additional higher income tax brackets;
- Introducing a Sweet Beverage Tax (and directing this revenue to food security programs);
- A provincial Carbon Pollution Levy;

Another source of funding would be to reduce government tax credits in some areas that are working against equality and climate goals. Overall the provincial tax system should undergo a thorough review to determine the degree to which tax credit expenditures are reinforcing income and wealth inequality and unsustainable practices.

Reallocate Spending

While aggressive austerity has reduced provincial government spending below acceptable levels in most areas, there are some exceptional cases where current spending may be simply not necessary or even causing harm. For example, the crisis has demonstrated that there are many people in prisons who did not need to be there (Maynard & Piché, 2020) and there is evidence that we are over-policed more broadly (Dobchuk-Land & Maier, 2020, p. 75). This spending could be reallocated to help achieve alternative policy objectives that would reduce pressures on our criminal justice system.

6. The Need for Engagement with Labour and Civil Society Going Forward

In addition to cuts to the public service, the current government has taken steps to limit the diversity of representation on government advisory bodies. Where the previous NDP provincial government actively included representatives of both labor and business on advisory bodies and government agency boards and commissions, the current PC government has systematically excluded labour representatives from these appointments and has aimed to reduce and eliminate many of these consultative entities. For example, in 2016 the government dispensed with labour representation on the Premier's economic advisory council (Lett, 2016) and in 2017, the government eliminated the Minister's Advisory Council on Workplace Safety and Health (Annable, 2017b). The Premier's new economic council, with a very narrow range of experience, appears to equate the economy with private for-profit business. Labour unions have been keen to contribute but have continued to be sidelined during the pandemic (Guard, 2020). There have also been concerns expressed from a broad spectrum of public administration experts and cross-party parliamentarians regarding the PC government use of unprecedented legislative tactics to hide the content of government bills, limit public scrutiny, and force through legislation with minimal debate (Sanders, 2021c).

An alternative strategy could reverse this course and include broad-based engagement and governance processes to access the best ideas and skills, and to build support for a provincial economic recovery strategy. Marginalized populations and community based organizations in Manitoba hold important insights and knowledge that can and should be tapped going forward (Dobchuk-Land & Maier, 2020). Provincial governance to date has drawn narrowly on private sector business interests, and the falling popularity of the governing party and its leader over the crisis suggests the public is not supportive of the hardline conservative approach taken. Public option polls suggest that there is strong support in Manitoba for more progressive economic policies such as increasing benefits for low income households, and, higher taxes on corporations and high income earners (Mulvale, 2020, pp. 169–170), and pre-pandemic polling of Canadians suggests a majority support the idea of a Green New Deal (McCracken, 2020b).

7. Conclusion

MAJOR SOCIAL, POLITICAL and economic crises generate opportunities for radical or reactionary transformation of our social and economic institutions. Which one prevails has profound implications for the well-being of various stakeholder groups. The needed effort and response to the coronavirus pandemic has been compared to that of the Second World War, a traumatic global event that ushered in a historic reduction in economic inequality and decades of relative stability, growth and improvements in living standards for working people. Since the 1970s however crises have more often been exploited by the wealthy and corporate interests to further profit at the expense of the broader population. How we collectively respond to the COVID-19 crisis, and whose interests are prioritized, will have immediate and lasting impacts on who recovers and who bears the cost of this emergency.

In Manitoba, the response to growing social and economic needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic initially was one of austerity — miserly supports paired with an aggressive push to cut public expenditure, supposedly to free up funds for health care. Standing effectively alone amongst provinces, with its approach condemned by a broad and politically diverse coalition, the government was eventually pushed to relent. An austerity bias however left Manitoba woefully underprepared for the second wave, leading to the healthcare system more broadly, including personal care homes, being overwhelmed. It was not until deep into the second wave of the virus that large scale provincial spending, as opposed to symbolic support, was forthcoming, and then only for businesses and organizations directly impacted by lockdowns.

There is a clear and ever present danger that the government will return to austerity. Such a move would be a continuation of the agenda of the PC government since being elected in 2016. Reducing racialized socio-economic inequalities and meaningfully addressing the climate crisis will require reversing course and considering alternatives such as the recommendations outlined in this report. The policies put forward collectively require the Manitoba government to act as a leader and steward and to make the historic investments we need in our people and our built environment.

The time to act is now. Interest rates are at record lows and needs are intensified. We need to shift focus from fiscal debt to the growing economic, social and environmental deficit, and the ability of government investment to grow our economy, get us out of the recession, and build a greener, more inclusive, and prosperous province. We need look no further than our southern neighbour for the dire consequences of a status quo course: intensified racism, polarized political conflict, the broad rejection of science, including in the highest levels of government, and intense social unrest. We can do better.

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Endnotes

1 Based on public accounts (Manitoba Department of Finance, 2019), health spending increased 0.9 per cent between fiscal year 2016/17 and 2018/19, while inflation between 2016 and 2018 in Manitoba was 4.2 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2020b).

2 In some extreme cases, austerity may be the only option if investors have such low confidence in the ability of a government to repay or self-finance their debts, such that they will not purchase the debt but this situation is not currently applicable to most advanced developed countries, including Canada and its provinces.

3 The government however disputed the audit's findings and continued to claim to the government had run a deficit.

4 Based on full year revenue loss projection in Manitoba budget documents 2016–2020 (Manitoba, 2019).

5 See also McArthur et al. (2020.

6 For a more detailed account of the economic impacts in Manitoba during the first wave, see Baragar (2020).

7 See McCracken (2021) for further discussion of the economic impact of the crisis on women in Manitoba.

8 For comparison, based on Statistics Canada (2021a) the last two major recessions in Manitoba in 1982 and 1991 lead to real GDP contractions of 2.3 and 3.3 per cent respectively.

9 If labour and capital are already fully employed, fiscal and monetary policy may just end up generating inflation, unless it is strategically targeted and expanding the labour-capital supply.

10 For a full review of federal government supports provided in response to COVID-19, see Government of Canada (2021).

11 As has been noted by others, the fiscal stabilization account is more a "political gimmick than a viable tool of public-sector accounting" (Lett, 2019). As the Manitoba Auditor General (2019)has made clear, the purpose of the fund is to allow the government "to meet deficit targets under the Fiscal Responsibility and Taxpayer Protection Act" (p. 23) and to meet non-binding requirements of the Financial Administration Act. The OAG has highlighted that the account provides "a cash management tool [that] helps the government determine how much of its cash and investments are readily available or liquid" (p.25). The OAG goes on to describe how in an emergency such as a forest fire or flood, if "the Province would need to obtain a significant amount of cash quickly — this could lead to having to borrow at unfavorable rates, depending on the current market rates" (p.25). The reality is however that in the current economic context, lenders are flocking to safe assets and government borrowing rates are low.

12 The government only reluctantly released updated projections of a $2.9 billion deficit at the end of June, the Friday afternoon prior to the Canada Day long weekend, leading to accusations of trying bury the news (Lett, 2020c).

13 This was also reinforced months later by a "celebration" led by the Premier in late September to announce the balancing the 2019-2020 budget (Kusch, 2020e), during the early stages of the fall COVID surge as Manitobans suffered from an acute lack of testing capacity and delays in contact tracing (see Section 2).

14 See note at end of table regarding inclusion criteria.

15 As of March 3rd, 2021 the Bridge Program amounts paid out had increased to $134 million (Durrani, 2021).

16 This $390 million total includes the Bridge Grant ($100 million), Longer Term Recovery Fund ($50 million), the Gap Protection Plan ($120 million) and wage subsidy programs ($120 million) — see Manitoba (2020ai). The total announced support for businesses was estimated by the province at $420 million as of January 2021 (Manitoba, 2021c).

17 This terminology is not universal — Baker et al. (2020) for example use the term 'elimination' for the stricter strategy we describe here that others have described as suppression, and view a 'suppression' strategy as allowing for some community transmission.

18 Morris and Mintz (2021) for example suggest that three new daily cases per 100,000 "of community-acquired cases or those with an unknown source might be acceptable with an effective test–trace–isolate–support system in place" for their proposed suppression strategy. Manitoba was approximately at 3.7 total new daily cases per 100,000 in early March 2021 (Manitoba, 2021a).

19 Author's calculation based on 2018 data from Statistics Canada (2021c, 2021b).

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