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Election 2011

# UNSPUN

September 27, 2011

## Why the Manitoba Provincial Election Matters

**E**lections matter. Some matter more than others. The October 4, 2011 provincial election in Manitoba is important. This is less because of what is going on in Manitoba, where we have had stable and relatively progressive government since 1999, and more because of what is happening beyond Manitoba.

Federally, a right-wing Conservative majority government was elected in May, 2011. It is possible that provincial elections this fall will give us right-wing governments in almost every province.

In any event, it now seems likely that over the next four years we are going to see intensified assaults on Canada's already tattered social safety net, on labour rights, and on poor people and racialized minorities who will be increasingly vilified and further marginalized. It will mean more free trade deals that weaken our sovereignty, turn more powers over to transnational corporations, and align us ever more closely with regimes that persistently violate human rights. It will mean a worsening of the inequality agenda, and the damage that it generates.

Further, many crucially important issues will *not* be adequately dealt with. We will not get the progressive solutions that we need to environmental issues such as climate change, the tar sands, and the proposed Keystone XL pipeline from the tar sands in Alberta to the southern U.S.A. We will make no progress whatever toward a national urban strategy to assist cities with the costs of investments

in necessary infrastructure, a national housing strategy at a time when low-income Canadians in every province are struggling to find adequate and affordable housing, and a national child care strategy when we know how considerable its benefits would be.

South of us, the U.S. economy is in trouble. President Obama has negotiated a disastrous debt ceiling plan that will lead to severe cuts to an already wholly inadequate social safety net, and that will *not* require the richest people and the most profitable corporations to pay their fair share of taxes. The U.S. shows no signs of being prepared to make the massive public investments necessary to put people back to work and rebuild the economy. Nor does it show any signs of taking action to stop the relentless assault on the trade union movement, now down to about 7 percent of the private sector labour force. Europe similarly faces massive economic problems.

Inequality has risen dramatically in most of these economies, the result of 30 years of right-wing economic policies that have produced a massive increase in the numbers of the very rich and the very poor, and undermined economic stability for the working majority in the middle. The inequality agenda produces a wide range of well-documented social and economic problems.

These problems are sparking serious responses in cities across the globe. These responses, in their various forms, such as street riots in British cities for



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## *Election 2011 UNSPUN continued ...*

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example, will be used as justification for oppressive state tactics that will make matters worse.

### **Meanwhile, in Manitoba**

Manitoba is a small 'have-not' province and what is done here has little impact on global events. Nor has what has been done here since 1999 been particularly earth shaking or even significant. NDP governments in Manitoba have been frustratingly cautious. If the current government is re-elected, this will undoubtedly continue to be the case.

But in the midst of the chaos described above some positive things are happening in Manitoba that are making a difference in peoples' lives. When taken together, they are having a cumulative impact that distinguishes Manitoba from most other provinces in terms of performance and results.

In his analysis of the Manitoba economy University of Manitoba economist Fletcher Baragar shows that the Manitoba economy has been stronger and more stable than other provinces. While net debt as a percentage of GDP has risen since the economic crisis in 2008 and is now between 25 and 26 percent, it is less than the 32 percent level in 1999. The exodus of people from the province has been stopped and reversed, the result of aggressive policies to attract immigrants and of strategic initiatives, such as a revision of construction industry legislation that raised minimum wages and established a common provincial standard for all construction workers, to reduce outmigration. The drastic decline in numbers of doctors and nurses has been significantly reversed; and the unemployment rate is consistently below the Canadian average and the rates in most other provinces.

Inequality is not as bad in Manitoba as elsewhere in Canada. In 2009, the after-tax shares of income for the top and bottom 20 per cent of income earners in Canada were 44.2 and 4.9 percent; in Manitoba they were 41.6 and 5.6 percent. Small steps have been taken to improve the circumstances of people of low and modest incomes: the government has committed to producing 300 units of new social

housing per year for each of the next five years; has consistently raised the minimum wage; has invested in effective programs like Neighbourhoods Alive that have had positive effects in low-income communities; has expanded community colleges and off-campus public education facilities for high-school leavers in urban centres; and has significantly increased the number of childcare spaces while introducing a pension plan for childcare workers. All of these are examples of the fact that social justice, solidarity, sharing, fairness---not the individualism and greed of neoliberalism, and its contempt for working people and the poor---remain the dominant philosophical underpinnings of the Manitoba NDP government. None of this is enough; more needs to be done.

But in the midst of the chaos occurring elsewhere as the consequence of 30 years of neoliberal policies that started with Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and came to North America via Ronald Reagan in 1980, Manitoba stands as a beacon of relative sanity. In Manitoba we are moving, albeit too slowly, in the right direction, while elsewhere movement is in the wrong direction and fast.

There are those who will argue that provincial elections are irrelevant, when the real issue is the chaos of global capitalism. While this is true, the social forces needed to overturn the chaos of global capitalism are simply not now there, and there is no viable vision, yet, for a better, saner future for humankind.

In these difficult times, when chaos reigns and the way forward is not clear, it is important that we have a provincial government that is competent, honest, and that takes steady steps in a progressive direction. This is especially the case when we have a federal government moving our country further to the right.

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