

A free Manitoba... one year later

In this feature Doug Smith of Canadian University Press outlines for the Gazette, what the fiscal restraint policies of Manitoba's P.C. government mean for the province's social services.

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When people say the country's future lies in the West they are usually referring to Alberta with its enormously rich Heritage fund and its growing base of petro-chemical industries.

People interested in taking a glimpse at the real future of the country however, are well advised to look at Manitoba and the government of Sterling Lyon.

In defeating Ed Schreyer's New Democratic government last fall Lyon demonstrated his political astuteness by manipulating the anti-government spending sentiment that is gaining momentum across the country. Even Pierre Trudeau has become a born-again fiscal conservative with his plans to slash federal spending on social service programs.

A Conservative MP recently boasted that Joe Clark would make Sterling Lyon look like a pussy-cat if he became prime minister. Whether or not Clark has the stomach for the type of sustained attack on public sector spending that Lyon has waged is debatable but it is clear that he, and politicians like him are setting Canada's political agenda.

The prime thesis of the Lyon philosophy is that the main cause of inflation is government spending. In the election he painted a picture of a government bureaucracy grown out of control. The Conservatives, he said would not cut any programs—instead they would manage them more efficiently. Since everyone knows someone who knows someone who knows a civil servant that does nothing but sharpen pencils Lyon's promise looked attractive to many voters.

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Even before he was sworn in as premier Lyon dismissed three deputy ministers, including Lionel Orlikow, who as minister of education had on occasion downplayed the importance of the three Rs. The next move was somewhat unexpected as they repealed the province's family law bill.

The bill, which guaranteed equal sharing of assets upon the break down of a marriage had been criticized in spring hearings by a Winnipeg lawyer. Ken Houston said many Winnipeg business men would leave the province rather than let their wives get a shot at their money. Lyon outraged many women by then appointing Houston to the two person committee that was to review the bill and make recommendations how it should be changed.

Lyon managed to cool things down a little by appointing a woman to the committee only to really stir things up by saying that no one could accuse Conservatives of being against women when it was well known they were "among the best breeders" in the world.

While this was going on Lyon mounted his attack on the civil service. A task force on government reorganization headed by Winnipeg business man Conrad Riley started poking into all aspects of the civil service. At the same time a freeze was put on hiring in the civil service that reduced the government payroll by 15,000 people. Lyon also broke a campaign promise not to fire any civil servants by laying off 370, most of whom worked in Northern Manitoba.

The provincial government has declined in light of the present economic crisis with rising unemployment and inflation, inflation lies in the curtailing of wages and government sector spending. They see any government expense which does not lead directly to profit as being essentially unproductive. His attitude was clearly reflected in the firing of the task force.

The task force recommended that the provincial government be restructured to resemble the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, a not too surprising suggestion since it is a member of the CIBC board of directors.

In discussing the universities, the task force felt that the province, through the Unities Grants Commission should exercise its right to cut programs which it does not feel are worthwhile. The report also criticized the number of tenured professors at universities and called for a freeze on the grant of tenure.

In the area of social services the attitude was that government should intrude as little as possible into the affairs of private enterprise, was suggested that the department of orate and consumer affairs only handle complaints rather than going out and initiating investigations on its own. Likewise the rentals was advised merely to deal with cases brought to him by tenants and to avoid investigation

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his own. These departments were also to reduce their publicity budgets—probably on the theory that the less people know about them, the fewer will use them and their maintenance will be justified in making further.

Lyon said the Tories were going to give for all Manitobans instead of fomenting a war the way he felt the NDP had done. However, most of the breaks that he gave were to people in upper income brackets when he reduced estate taxes and death duties.

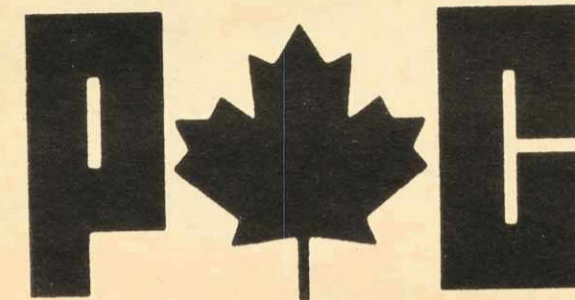
At the same time he hit low-income means with a one-two punch in January when he laid off a third of the staff at the rent review board and announced the government would get out of "the low-cost housing business". Lyon has since announced a rent control program that goes against the advice of a report prepared by the rent review board when the report was released to the public the government edited out all those comments which indicated there was no present intent to remove rent controls. Under the new program apartments will be decontrolled when tenants move out, giving landlords an incentive to evict and harass their tenants.

When the estimates for this year's budget were announced last spring the only areas of increase were for jails and highways—using some people to suggest that roads were for unemployed Manitobans who could not afford to leave the province while the jails were likely to be the province's only form of low-income housing.

"In Manitoba the war on party has become a war on the poor"

The health sector has also come under heavy attack from the government. Hospitals received a 2.9 per cent increase in their budgets when their inflation rate is close to 10 per cent. At several hospitals in Winnipeg there have been lay-offs and, at one hospital, workers were offered an actual decrease in salary during the spring negotiation. Adding

to Eugene Kostyra, who negotiates for the health workers "if we get any sort of wage increase there will have to be a cut in the quality of health care in the province. The health minister has said the province may close regional health care centres that had been set



up to fight the lack of medical service in rural and Northern Manitoba and to provide better community service in the city. The NDP had abolished premiums for medicare in the early 70s but the PCs have been heard to mutter recently that unless health care spending is brought under control, the premiums will have to be reintroduced.

The provincial universities were hit by the restraint program when they received an average increase of 2.7 per cent, the lowest in the country. The University of Manitoba, the province's largest university, only received a one per cent increase. As a result the university has trimmed its staff by 2.5 per cent and increased its tuition by 20 per cent. As well the university has had to drop a number of continuing education programs and extension programs in Northern Manitoba.

In dealing with its own employees the province has been particularly harsh. In negotiations last spring they offered clerical staff a zero per cent salary increase on the principle that most of them were married women and did not really need the income. When employees objected to the low wage offers and pointed to the fact that the province was giving doctors a 6.8 per cent increase labour minister Norma Price said that there was no comparing the two and further more Manitoba workers were spoiled.

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The provincial legal aid program had its budget savaged by close to 50 per cent. A thirty-five dollar user fee was introduced and a legal clinic run by volunteer law students had its funding cut off. The former director of legal aid, Roland Penner, said "In Manitoba the war on poverty is becoming a war on the poor."

The minimum wage in Manitoba has not been increased for nearly two years and the government has indicated that it might not be increased until the economy turns around, a euphemism for never, according to one observer.

The campaign slogan of the Conservatives was that they would "Free Manitoba". They have certainly arranged it so Manitobans are free to be charged limitless rent increase, free to wait for admittance to hospitals, free to make less than the cost of living, and free to go to university if they can afford it.

The Conservative message of freedom is gaining popularity across the country as all governments attempt to curtail spending. Soon we may all be free to sleep under bridges.



Dal Photo/Delorey

John Buchanan Nova Scotia premier-elect gives Joe Clark a grateful glare...



Dal Photo/Delorey

then shares a joke with him, as both provincial and federal parties shared a victory in Buchanan's election win



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they represent the conservative united front that appears to be sweeping the country.