

GOERTZEN TAKES CHARGE

• Five bills punted as placeholder sworn in as premier • ‘I intend to be quick to listen’

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NEWLY minted, temporary Manitoba Premier Kelvin Goertzen is striking a new tone, scrapping controversial legislation and pledging to listen to Manitobans.

“There is lots of division in Manitoba,” Goertzen said Wednesday, hours after being sworn in as premier.

“It’s the animosity that worries me, as much as anything.”

Goertzen will be premier for just two months, when the Progressive Conservative party is set to elect its new leader, following Brian Pallister’s Wednesday resignation.

For the next few weeks, Goertzen plans to have many more visitors to his office than his predecessor, saying the premier must listen to Manitobans.

“I intend to be quick to listen and slow to speak; I want to hear what their views are,” he said, adding that social-media arguments over issues such as COVID-19 vaccines are driving Manitobans apart.

Goertzen announced that controversial education-reform Bill 64, as well as four other pieces of contentious legislation, will be taken off the order paper.

“Those bills will not move forward this fall,” he said, adding the government will either withdraw the bills or prorogue the legislature.

“A new leader has to be able to set their own agenda.”

However, the Progressive Conservatives intend to pass their budget-implementation bill when the legislature resumes in October, before the party chooses a new leader.

Lt.-Gov. Janice Filmon swore in Goertzen at a ceremony with no media access.

“I made the decision it should be just a small, private ceremony,” he said, explaining he didn’t want to make it seem like he had the full authority

of a premier elected by popular vote.

He acknowledged that limiting the event to relatives had brought concerns about adequate media access, which he pledged to maintain.

Goertzen said he’s reached out to NDP Leader Wab Kinew, Winnipeg Mayor Brian Bowman, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the Association of Manitoba Municipalities, all of whom Pallister had clashed with, or largely ignored in his five years as premier.

“We are political adversaries, but we are not political enemies,” Goertzen said of Kinew, the Opposition leader.

Kinew welcomed the change of tone, and said it was grassroots effort that led to Bill 64’s death. But he cautioned that Goertzen was the minister driving controversial health-care and education reforms.

“The PCs are trying hard to rebrand themselves and project a new image, but... the new premier doesn’t quite turn the page,” said Kinew.

Liberal Leader Dougald Lamont similarly argued a new tone doesn’t guarantee substantive change.

“There’s a fair bit of bait and switch with this government,” Lamont said.

The opposition also raised the spectre of a hydro rate hike, as a budget bill can change rates for a year, even without separate legislation to change the regulatory process.

Goertzen declined to sanction two government MLAs who publicly decried the Tories’ vaccination mandate for front-line workers as an infringement on Manitobans’ rights.

“MLAs should bring the views of their constituents vigorously to that table — and I think the best results happen when they come to that table,” he said.

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Premier Kelvin Goertzen struck a conciliatory tone in his first news conference as leader and pledged to open his ears to Manitobans.

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GOERTZEN

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FROM A1

vaccinated people were less safe than unvaccinated people gathering in small indoor groups.

“Those two MLAs are repeating claims that are misinformation about vaccines; they’re undermining public-health orders, as we’re about to go

He said his caucus might not have felt they had access to Pallister, and that he'd spoken directly with MLAs James Teitsma (Radisson) and Josh Guenter (Borderland).

"I don't want, in my brief time as premier, to have everybody agree with me at the table; I don't want to try to dominate a decision," he said.

Yet both opposition parties said the pair should be punished, particularly Teitsma, who drew a comparison between the vaccine mandate and residential schools or the forced sterilization of Indigenous people. "It's such an emotional issue; we should only invoke residential schools when it's absolutely necessary," said Kinew. "I don't buy the argument that these folks are just standing up for their constituents."

Guenter had argued it was wrong to change course on reopening, despite the rise of the substantially more contagious delta variant of COVID-19, while Teitsma puzzled virologists in claiming that mass outdoor gatherings of

into a fourth wave," Lamont said, noting Manitobans are frustrated at some of the worst COVID-19 outcomes in Canada.

Kinew argued it was disingenuous of Goertzen to decry a rise in divisive rhetoric over vaccines when the party lacks "some courage" to discipline those two MLAs and persuade two others — Infrastructure Minister Ron Schuler and Seine River MLA Janice Morley-Lecomte — to get fully vaccinated.

Meanwhile, Goertzen has appointed Families Minister Rochelle Squires as deputy premier, and says he does not anticipate any other changes to cabinet while it's in caretaker mode.

The PCs still plan to eventually reform the public-school system, and Goertzen said Education Minister Cliff Cullen will discuss Bill 64 at a press conference today.

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