

Provincial ad campaign defends education reform

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AS signs on Winnipeg lawns denounce education reform Bill 64, and rural municipalities pass motions rebuking the legislation, the provincial government has spent \$150,000 on things such as bus ads and billboards to try changing the tide of public opinion.

“It’s not a good use of taxpayers’ money,” said University of Manitoba political scientist Royce Koop. “A lot of the time what we’re seeing from governments now is just flat-out advertising.”

The PC government says its Better Education Starts Today strategy is a sweeping reform that requires as much feedback as possible, even though it’s already tabled the bill. Education Minister Cliff Cullen’s department is thus purchasing ads on bus benches, buses and digital channels to drum up response.

“In total, about \$150,000 has been spent on promoting engagement with the BEST strategy, including past promotion of virtual meetings, telephone town halls and surveys,” wrote Jamie Hofing, Cullen’s press secretary.

He said roughly 20,000 Manitobans have provided feedback on the reform, which includes the elimination of elected school boards.

Last month, the province launched a “Fact versus Fiction” website to respond to criticism from labour and opposition groups who have distributed thousands of lawn signs across Winnipeg against Bill 64.

In July, ads appeared on Winnipeg buses and bus stop benches, asking Manitobans to “help prepare our kids for their future” and directing them to a government website.

Political communications expert Alex Marland was surprised to see those ads were royal blue, as the PC Party uses light blue in its messaging.

“Colour schemes are an immediate (indicator) that causes people to associate a message with a political party,” said Marland, a professor at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. “I wouldn’t use the word propaganda, but I would say it borders on partisan.”

“What you’re doing is undermining neutrality.”

The same concerns emerged during the rollout of the Stephen Harper government’s Economic Action Plan, which many point to as an example of a permanent election campaign, where parties use government resources to fight ideological battles.

Ottawa erected roadside signs posted across the country with green, grey and blue colours, which many noticed didn’t include the red and orange of Conservatives’ two main opposition parties.

Manitobans might consider adopting rules now in place for the federal and Ontario governments, which bars their advertisements from using a colour similar to that of a political party in any prominent way, Marland said.

A May 2019 arm’s-length report for the Manitoba

government on non-partisan government advertising noted these rules, but didn’t recommend them.

Instead, former elections commissioner Michael Green suggested Manitoba could forbid mentioning the name or logo of a political party and stick with factual information instead of slogans that could benefit the governing party.

Governments can use publicity to help people understand things, such as what speed to slow to when an ambulance is on the side of a highway or how to access services, Koop said.

“When there’s a bill that is obviously contentious or unpopular, and the government is clearly advertising in order to address that lack of popularity, that’s a big difference,” he said, noting Bill 64 has already been tabled.

The ads fit into moves where governments issue cheques, producing a visual payment for the typical voter instead of a discreet change to their annual tax tabulation, which would be less noticeable (such as the education property tax rebate), Koop said.

A document formatted as a fact-check of what opposition parties and labour groups say isn’t so different in content from a Q& A document issued to journalists, except when the tone echoes an election campaign, Marland added.

“A government has the obligation to make sure that citizens are informed; they can’t just rely on the media and others,” he said.

“With a government communications campaign, you want to keep it as factual as possible, and away from any sense the government party is manipulating their position of power.”

Marland also noted school divisions themselves are a communications tool for government, as decision-making power ultimately rests with the cabinet.

“Boards exist, often, to provide ministers with a bit of distance from hotbutton issues,” he said.

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The provincial government has spent about \$150,000 on promoting its sweeping changes planned for the Manitoba education system.

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