

## SCOTT FORBES

THE Pallister government will be remembered for two things: first, its dismal record on health care, made most clear during the pandemic, when the result was overflowing hospitals, ICUs and morgues; and critically ill patients shipped out of province.

And second, it will also be remembered for its assault on public education.

Interim Premier Kelvin Goertzen has declared Bill 64 dead. Good. There was nothing in Bill 64 — the Education Modernization Act — to improve education for K-12 students. It was about political control and moving the purse strings into the premier's office. Bury it deep. And post a guard to ensure it doesn't rise zombie-like from the grave.

Former premier Brian Pallister's higher education policy was hidden from public view, but was no better. It defunded colleges and universities, and attempted to transform universities into an arm of government. The latter represents a deep misunderstanding about the role of universities in society.

Universities must operate without political interference and are deliberately legislated to be autonomous organizations. University acts contain language that tells government to keep its mitts off academic matters (but with more polite wording). And when governments overreach, as in Ontario with Premier Doug Ford's Student Choice Initiative, the courts have upheld university autonomy.

Academic matters at universities are governed by the senate, a body by design with a majority of faculty and students. Why? Because they are the core of the university. They are why universities exist.

Pallister and his ministers of advanced education have meddled directly in the academic affairs of universities. Bill 33, for example, empowers the minister to set fees by program and course. This opens university programming to direct political interference at the whim of government.

At their best, universities are agents of social mobility. Education allows students to lead more fulfilling lives with better economic

prospects, sometimes described as a ladder for social progress. The greatest benefits accrue to historically disadvantaged groups: minorities, Indigenous students, those from lower-income families. For universities to perform their function, they must be accessible to all.

Reducing university funding and raising tuition fees limits access. Setting differential program fees does the same. Such fees force poorer students into programs and careers they can afford, or out of university altogether if they lack the interest in less expensive programs. Students from wealthy families in Tuxedo or on Wellington Crescent will still become lawyers and doctors. The poor? They can get degrees in programs dictated by government, if they can afford university at all. Wealth shouldn't determine young people's career options.

Another Pallister-era policy was outcomesbased funding justified by the false claim that it improves "efficiency." It doesn't, as demonstrated by a 40-year failed experiment in Tennessee. Instead, it raises barriers to disadvantaged groups, especially people of colour. Because outcomesbased funding rewards high graduation rates, universities have restricted access to students most likely to graduate, disproportionately those who have the luxury of studying without financial or other worries common to disadvantaged families. It's much harder to get good grades if you're a single mom, or a student working nights at 7-Eleven to pay the bills.

We need to send the Pallister-era higher education policies to the scrap heap. As well as improving the lives of students, universities are key to economic development and the post-pandemic recovery. That won't happen on starvation rations. Universities need secure, stable budgets for long-range planning, not austerity, and especially not now. Adequate funding eliminates barriers to access and helps maintain program quality; jacking up tuition fees does neither. Loans and token increases to scholarships just don't cut it.

Certainly, government provides partial (albeit ever-shrinking) funds for universities; it does deserve some oversight, best done at arm's length

or through boards of governors, on which they are well represented.

An arm's-length body to superintend and coordinate higher education with a mandate for fiscal oversight and program co-ordination would prevent direct political interference. That existed until 2014 as the Council on Post-Secondary Education; perhaps its time to re-establish it in some form.

This government must also drop the Public Services Sustainability Act (Bill 28) and its unlawful interference with collective bargaining, which is protected under Canada's Charter. Pallister's meddling in 2016 resulted in a finding by the Manitoba Labour Board of an unfair labour practice. His government secretly compelled the U of M to enforce Bill 28, which had yet to appear in the legislature. It was a simple case of extortion. When the bill was passed, it was never proclaimed; Pallister thought that was clever and that it would protect his government from a court challenge. It didn't; the courts tossed out Bill 28 as unconstitutional. It was another blatant interference with university autonomy and, indeed, with workers' rights across the province.

Our universities have languished during the dark Pallister years: a top priority of the new premier and the PC Party will be to set a new course into a brighter future for higher education in Manitoba.

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**The Pallister government's unpopular Bill 64, the Education Modernization Act, will not proceed under new Progressive Conservative leadership.**

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