

OPINION

PC cabinet missing in action

By: Scott Forbes

THE response of the Brian Pallister government to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a comprehensive failure. Manitobans need only look to the burgeoning obituary pages in the *Free Press* to find the evidence.

The indictment of this government comes daily from across the political spectrum, and even federal Conservatives decry this government's performance. The global pandemic highlights the need for a strong social safety net, yet perversely, the premier remains obsessed with dismantling government at the worst possible time.

A recent Probe poll shows, not surprisingly, that Manitobans overwhelmingly reject Pallister's pandemic approach.

During the summer, when every health expert in the western world was forecasting a fall resurgence of the virus, this government squandered the luxury of time and failed to expand testing, tracing and data analysis capacity. Now we cannot even keep track of how many active COVID-19 cases there are, and the premier and his minister of health obfuscate about contact tracing.

Pallister and the former health minister, Kelvin Goertzen, previously gutted the planning capacity in the health-care system so badly needed now. Their cuts were arbitrary, implemented whether needed or not — and in many cases they were not. In hospitals, they fired support staff and downloaded more duties to already overburdened nurses. Instead of stockpiling sufficient supplies of PPE, Pallister, Goertzen and the current minister of health, Cameron Friesen, distributed expired masks to teachers and nurses, hoping no one would notice.

They did.

Pallister and Finance Minister Scott Fielding spent \$45 million to send seniors a \$200 cheque and a thank-you note. What if that \$45 million had been spent on personal-care homes instead? The daily news conferences announcing COVID-19 statistics might be considerably shorter.

The litany of failure goes on, but the common thread is Pallister's misplaced sense of priority: protect government coffers first and Manitobans second. He is an ideologue, inflexible and unable to see past the bottom line. He trumpeted a balanced budget while the toll of infections and deaths began to soar. That was the height of arrogance.

His focus on a government that is mean and lean has meant more dead and dying.

Pallister has been aided and abetted throughout by his cabinet ministers, who seem less prepared and less capable with each public appearance. We have a health minister who accepts failure as an option in our personal-care facilities, provides succor to anti-mask protesters, who attacks health-care professionals when they point out system shortcomings and declares he's "got this" when he clearly doesn't.

The finance minister works in lockstep with the premier to gouge every possible dollar from ministry budgets, never looking ahead. Just-in-time spending only works if you spend in time. They haven't, always a dollar short and a day late.

We're saddled with an education minister who sits on tens of millions of dollars in federal cash while teachers work past the point of exhaustion. Students with disabilities get left behind for the sake of short-term savings. The entire cabinet and backbench has stood by and applauded these decisions.

Through it all, the cabinet has blindly executed Pallister's policy of razing government even as the pandemic raged. Not a peep from any cabinet minister when Pallister ludicrously suggested that volunteers should take over the duties of fired civil servants because he wouldn't add to the payroll, even to save lives. Not a peep when the premier and his cabinet failed to implement already-prepared plans for the crisis in personal care homes or even after, when the horrifying scale of the crisis leaked into the media.

This Conservative government was not elected to prioritize spending cuts over people's lives. Its policy of shrinking government at all costs means people have died who needn't have. No wonder Manitobans overwhelmingly disapprove. And it all seems very calculated. Pallister will take the heat now for slashing government at the worst possible time, and then step down before the next election. The Conservative party expects that a new leader, one who snarls less and smiles more, will cause Manitobans to forget the current reign of error.

Should they? This current cabinet has been unable to persuade the premier to change course before hitting the iceberg dead ahead. Now while the ship sinks, those ministers still fear to speak out. Or worse, still they think it best to follow the captain down to the bottom. Not quite Churchillian leadership. And not good for Manitobans.

Those in cabinet who do aspire to replace Pallister will have shared responsibility for the lamentable decisions taken now. And they should be prepared to answer one question: where were you when Manitobans needed you most?

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