

OPINION

Mr. Pallister tilts toward authoritarianism

By: *Scott Forbes*

ONE of the many benefits of higher education — aside from higher incomes, lower unemployment, better health and reduced social inequality — is that it inoculates individuals against authoritarianism. More education leaves one less inclined to support autocratic leaders who enforce a strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom.

Authoritarianism undermines the foundations of democracy, as we saw during the Trump presidency. But it is not just in America where authoritarianism is a threat. Under our system of parliamentary democracy, leaders of majority governments wield enormous power, held in check between elections largely by past customs and norms of behaviour. The cabinet of the governing party serves as a last line of defence against an untethered authoritarian leader.

Anyone who has not noticed Brian Pallister's strong authoritarian streak has not been paying attention. The premier prefers legislation to negotiation and confrontation to conciliation. His repeated attacks on the press ("Rosemary, to be fair, you haven't come up with a single idea...") have become a signature move. He even threatened to sue the *Winnipeg Free Press* over a factually correct story about taxes owing on his Costa Rican property.

Pallister's flagrant disregard for the basic rules of democracy are a frontal assault on our democratic system of government. This was on full display last spring when he shut down opposition questioning of the budget. His excuse? The questions were "dull and repetitive." Kelvin Goertzen, falling in line with the authoritarian move of his leader, chided the opposition to ask "better questions." This sort of behaviour belongs in a banana republic, not a parliamentary democracy.

Last fall, Pallister introduced 19 mystery bills into the legislature, keeping them secret from the people whose very lives they will affect. His reason? The opposition wasn't nice to us. It shows a stunning contempt for Manitobans.

Pallister's authoritarian streak surfaced again in his legislative agenda. Instead of entering into collective bargaining with public-sector workers, he simply eliminated bargaining over wages with Bill 28, the Public Sector Sustainability Act. When Bill 28 was challenged in the courts, its provisions were ruled unconstitutional. His response? He doubled down with Bill 9 and even more draconian restrictions to collective bargaining. This, too, will likely be struck down by the courts.

Canadians are fortunate to still have a robust legal system that stands as a bulwark against authoritarianism. But this government continues to push against the ramparts.

Bill 33, which undermines university governance, is also destined to be struck down in the courts. Why? The provisions it contains were already ruled unlawful by the courts in Ontario. The Student Choice Initiative of the Ford government gave the minister the power to decide how university student fees are collected. It is not public money. These are fees collected on behalf of a democratically elected student government, for initiatives decided upon by elected student representatives.

Its effect in Ontario was a dramatic defunding of student groups. That served a useful political purpose for the Ford government: the silencing of critics. The courts ruled this was an unlawful interference with internal university governance.

With the introduction of Bill 33, Mr. Pallister is indicating he knows better than the democratically elected student government how things should be run. That is one hallmark of an authoritarian. There are others.

During collective bargaining last fall between faculty and the University of Manitoba, Pallister and Finance Minister Scott Fielding intervened, dictating the financial terms they wanted with a threat to cut funding to the university otherwise. The settlement reached contained a salary freeze, the third in five years.

But that was not enough for Pallister, and he followed through on his threat to cut funding from the university.

The dictionary definition of extortion is to obtain something, especially money, through force or threats. Threats and intimidation are another hallmark of an authoritarian government.

The suppression of dissent by opponents is a further authoritarian hallmark. Bill 67, that criminalizes protest and curbs Indigenous sovereignty, checks that box. Demonizing opponents is another authoritarian power move. Here, one need only turn to the Pallister press conferences, where the targets of his attacks are legion: organized labour, the public sector, university faculty, the media, opposition members, the federal government, the city of Winnipeg, First Nations, the Métis, even Halloween. That box is checked, too.

Pallister's untethered authoritarianism leaves an enormous mess for his successor to clean up. There are the growing lawsuits; the need to rebuild bridges with the many groups he has alienated.

But perhaps most importantly, Manitoba's Progressive Conservatives will need to explain this. They have stood by passively while the premier has made a mockery of our democratic institutions. Why should they ever be trusted with elected office again?

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