

OPINION

Pallister didn't write austerity playbook

By: Scott Forbes

The premier had cultivated a tough-guy reputation. He had a dour exterior, was uncompromising, dogmatic and cared little about personal popularity. His relationship with the press was frosty. He was not a consensus-builder; his natural instinct was to polarize and confront.

He believed public services erode individual initiative and the entrepreneurial spirit. He was an ideologue, strongly opposed to unions and the public sector. He declared that governments don't create real jobs, the private sector being "the productive sector."

Former British Columbia premier Bill Bennett was known as an architect of fiscal restraint in the province in the 1980s.

The province was mired in a deep economic recession and his government faced a large deficit, though not as large as he claimed. With a fresh majority government and a weak opposition, now was the time to strike. Without warning he tabled 26 pieces of legislation, many controversial, on a single day.

It was built off the pre-election strategy "Operation Homerun." The hit list included everything wrong with government: teachers, professors and their unions; rent controls; human-rights legislation. It attacked social services and organized labour. The target was a 25 per cent reduction in the civil service.

The legislation included bills virtually eliminating collective bargaining for public-sector workers; and allowing them to be fired without cause. And to avoid criticism, the premier simply chose not to face the legislature.

Almost everything above could apply to Manitoba in 2020. A premier with a rural outlook and authoritarian tendencies, an ideologue with a dislike for the public sector, one who prefers legislation to negotiation. And one not averse to using a severe recession as cover for a radical agenda: to shrink government dramatically and cripple organized labour.

But it describes a different premier in a different party at a different time: Social Credit premier Bill Bennett in British Columbia in 1983.

Bennett and Pallister employed the same playbook, with tactics that are eerily similar. Both shamelessly exploited prominent public events as pretense for controversial decisions. Bennett used Expo '86 as the excuse for draconian right-to-work legislation; Pallister, the prospect of Manitoba 150 celebrations as risible pretext for an early election call.

Both used the tactic of legislative barrage, with Bennett introducing 26 bills on a single day, Pallister 33. Both used the threat of legislation passed but not proclaimed to fetter unions. Bennett passed but did not immediately proclaim right-to-work legislation for the Expo '86 job site in an attempt to intimidate organized labour; the unions called his bluff. Pallister similarly passed but did not proclaim Bill 28, which dictated wages and benefits for public sector workers; the strategy worked to curb wage settlements before the courts ruled the legislation unconstitutional.

Both Bennett and Pallister had the opportunity to unite people during a time of crisis but did not. That simply wasn't in their nature. To both, a majority government didn't need to consult, especially with its hometown enemies. It legislated. People who opposed the government's actions were called out as bad British Columbians / Manitobans.

Both viewed the public sector as essentially parasitic. It kept the private sector from growing. The solutions were simple: deregulate, downsize and privatize. Both found a fiscal crisis convenient cover to fast-track their austerity agenda and assault on big labour. Bennett made union certification more difficult and decertification easier; his legislation prevented public-sector workers from negotiating anything other than wages and benefits, after he had already legislated those same wages and benefits.

Pallister's Bill 28 also eliminated collective bargaining over wages and benefits for public-sector workers. And Pallister has now tabled legislation to make union certification more difficult and decertification easier.

With a strong majority government behind him, Bennett succeeded. He shrank dramatically the size and role of government and curbed union power. That gained praise from neoconservatives ranging from Margaret Thatcher to Milton Friedman. Friedman especially liked the lack of advance warning about looming radical change. It offered opponents no chance to mobilize — democracy with an authoritarian streak.

But Bennett went too far, too fast. He alienated urban voters, the bulk of the electorate, and left office deeply unpopular. After his departure, the Social Credit party, which had ruled B.C. almost uninterrupted for four decades, disintegrated and faded into electoral oblivion. It is now extinct.

Pallister is following a similar path. He is personally unpopular and many of his policies alienate urban voters, the bulk of the Manitoba electorate. Instead trying to persuade opponents, he prefers to polarize and attack fellow Manitobans. Does it end the same way as with Bennett and his Social Credit party? Time will tell, but history shows that hubris and extremism are a bad combination.

Scott Forbes is the president of the Manitoba Organization of Faculty Associations and a professor of biology at the University of Winnipeg.

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