

Centralized Power in the Pallister Government

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Playing Hardball

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The governing approach followed by Pallister's regime reflected his belief system, personal leadership philosophy, the institutional arrangements of government, and the changing contexts within political systems and society.

Confident in his belief of the desirability of limited government, Pallister took actions across government involving downsizing, consolidation, austerity, and an insistence on reporting on results to achieve value for money. He pursued this agenda aggressively, particularly in the healthcare system. Three waves of an unprecedented pandemic—each increasingly severe—first hitting Manitoba beginning in March 2020, not only challenged Pallister's belief system, it also disrupted his game plan to downsize government and achieve a balanced budget.

Pallister grew up in modest circumstances, was a proficient athlete in several sports, and built a highly successful business. This background shaped his personality and leadership style. He is an intensely partisan and competitive politician who wants to win every encounter with his political opponents. **Even during a pandemic that threatened lives and livelihoods, his strident partisanship meant little willingness to engage in cross-party cooperation on policy responses.**

Pallister has become known for practicing “hardball” politics, including changing, bending or breaking the established rules of political competition to gain an advantage over his opponents. Some examples would be: changes made to election financing laws; the early 2019 election call in advance of the date fixed in law; withholding the contents of 19 bills for four months; and most recently, the elimination of information in the estimates of government spending.

There is a popular thesis in Canadian political science that first ministers, whether they be the prime minister or a provincial premier, have, for multiple reasons too numerous to be described here, gained power at the expense of parliament and even cabinet. Due to party loyalty and discipline, majority governments are not at much risk of defeat, and legislatures find it difficult to hold them to account. Cabinet has lost much of its role as a forum for collective decision-making; instead it has become a kind of “focus group” used to test the first minister's ideas. Rather than being first among equals within cabinet, as the constitution implies, first ministers are said to have no equals.

Limited participation by other cabinet ministers and backbench government MPs/MLAs, it is argued, means that too few voices and perspectives are represented in key decision-making processes at the center of government. A pattern of one-person rule—the critics argue—is not only undemocratic, it also leads to poor policy-making because the ideological biases and policy preferences of the first minister are not subject to sufficient challenges and meaningful debates inside of government. Other ministers are said to lack the freedom to develop policy within their departments. Instead, they are



often carrying out directions from the first minister's office or other central agencies (discussed below).

Finding empirical evidence to sustain these charges is difficult because decision-making at the center of government is mostly shrouded in secrecy. Ministers swear an oath of cabinet confidentiality and documents used to support cabinet decision-making are mostly exempt under provincial freedom of information laws. Therefore, any commentary on the dynamics of power must necessarily involve speculation.

One-Person Rule?

In my view, the one-person rule thesis is mostly accurate but involves some exaggeration. Power within government is situational and dynamic so a first minister's control depends on the issue involved and can fluctuate significantly over time. It is also the case that power is not finite and therefore is not always found in one location. Context matters greatly to how power is exercised. During an emergency like the pandemic and the related economic downturn, power tends to become more centralized simply because the requirement for decisive and urgent decision-making leaves little time for consensus-seeking and deliberation.

Therefore, I favour a more subtle and nuanced interpretation of the power of the first minister. In the Manitoba case, I would argue that Premier Pallister runs a tightly controlled government. Even without the pressures of the pandemic, the institutional prerogatives that he possesses as premier clearly make him the single most important actor in government. However, the job also comes with a number of constraints that need to be recognized.

The premier's prerogatives include: the appointment, demotion and removal of cabinet ministers; issuing mandate letters to ministers describing directions and priorities for their individual departments; setting the agenda for cabinet meetings and deciding when a consensus is reached; the appointment of hundreds of senior officials, like deputy ministers, within the bureaucracy; the support of key central agencies like the Executive Council, the Finance Department and the Treasury Board Secretariat; and his role representing the province in the intergovernmental arena, which gives him considerable latitude to reach policy and financial agreements with other orders of government.

“Team Play”

Premier Pallister is fond of using the phrase “team play” to describe his approach to the political management of cabinet and caucus. In fact, he has the backing of a loyal and disciplined group of MLAs who comprise the caucus of the governing party. At regular private meetings of



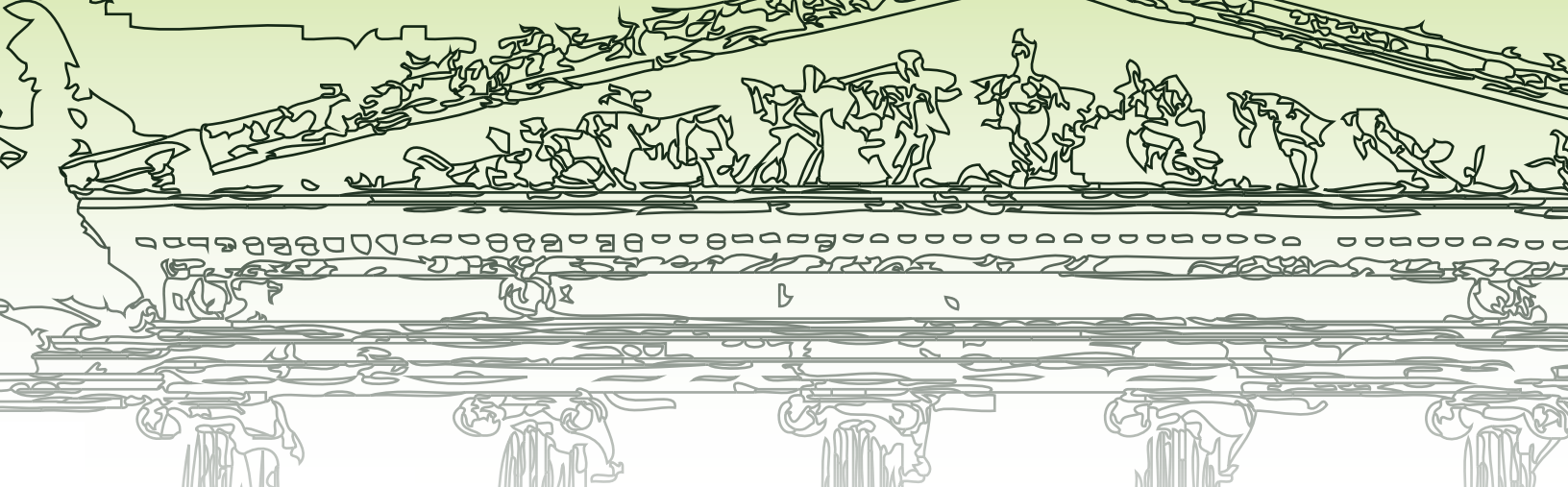
caucus, Pallister communicates his views on issues and political developments and listens to backbench concerns. This creates an onus on MLAs to support Premier Pallister and government business like bills and spending. Also, as party leader, Pallister must sign the nomination papers of MLAs seeking re-election.

Political Influencers

One source of increased power for first ministers' is the rise of a new group of influential actors who are neither elected politicians, nor professional public servants. The premier is advised and supported by a small, handpicked group of political staff working at the center of government. Those senior political advisers then coordinate the appointment of other political assistants working in ministers' offices.

In an era of permanent campaigning, political staff play an essential role in issues management and communications. They serve as “gatekeepers” in terms of access to the premier, they filter information, and they provide both substantive and tactical advice. No premier could manage the numerous demands and pressures of the job without knowledgeable and skilled staff.

Based on their reputations, the key insiders in the Pallister entourage are David McLaughlin (Clerk of the Executive Council, Secretary to Cabinet, and head of the public service) and Jonathan Scarth (Chief of Staff to the premier). McLaughlin had served as Campaign Director for the two



Conservative majority victories. With 30 years of political and policy experience, McLaughlin entered government in May 2020 amid some uproar when the opposition parties insisted that the clerk's position should be filled by a career public servant. In fact, more than half of the clerks in the modern era have brought partisan backgrounds to the job. Appointed in 2016, Scarth brought experience serving former PC premier Gary Filmon back in the 1990s. A Deputy Secretary to Cabinet, Michael Richards—who also directed PC election campaigns—was also seen as influential, but anecdotal evidence suggests that his standing with Premier Pallister has slipped recently.

Another Pallister supporter, Paul Beauregard, was hired in 2019 as Secretary of the Treasury Board, the committee of cabinet that oversees the expenditure budget of government. His main assignment was to drive the austerity agenda across the public sector. The outside view is that due to his overreaching and bullying style, Beauregard was dragged into partisan controversy, which shrewd political staff avoid, and resigned from his position as Treasury Board Secretary.

Beyond the personalities involved, it must be remembered that the combined premier's office/executive council staff is small (the total budget for the two offices is \$4 million in a total provincial budget of \$19 billion), and lacks the depth of expertise found in the permanent public service. There is also the fact that Premier Pallister seems to be guided mostly by his fundamental beliefs and is not an easy man to persuade, which would limit the influence of his political advisers despite their proximity to the main center of power.

Turning to constraints, even with a relatively small public sector, the Premier cannot arrange to be present, or even to shape the contents of all decisions that take place across a range of departments and semi-independent, non-departmental bodies, like health authorities and universities. The sheer number of issues, the limited time, and information available to him, and a necessary reliance on others to execute decisions, all make it simply impossible for the Premier to be in charge of everything.

The formal institutional arrangements of cabinet government based on individual ministerial responsibility mean that not all issues flow automatically to the premier's office. In one of my several conversations with Pallister over the years, he described his political management approach as one of "tight-loose control." **On issues of strategic importance to the Premier and his primary goals, he exercises top-down direction and control.** On secondary issues, ministers are granted more autonomy. He also believes it is his prerogative to remove an issue from the control of a weak or stumbling minister. Such actions must be politically calculated, because not all ministers are equal. Some have significant stature and backing within cabinet, the caucus, and the party at large.

Iron Grip?

The conventional wisdom is that a premier leading a majority government is politically invincible. This seems to be confirmed by the case of Brian Pallister. Even though recent polls suggest the PCs might lose the next election, and Pallister has reached a new low in terms of personal popularity, there has not been a peep of dissent among members of cabinet or caucus. **Personal loyalty to the Premier, party loyalty, fear of punishment for breaking ranks, the absence of a clear leader in waiting, and/or Pallister's indication that he might not serve out his full second term, may all be reasons for the silence.**

It might also be that the memory of the failed attempt in 2014 by five cabinet ministers to oust former NDP Premier Greg Selinger is still fresh in the minds of Conservatives. That open revolt contributed to a huge political setback for the NDP in the 2019 election, from which it is only now beginning to fully recover. All premiers have a limited supply of political capital to spend in the form of loyalty and support, so Pallister may voluntarily retire or be pressured by party elites to leave before the next election scheduled for October 2023.

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