



Canadian Centre for
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Manitoba Office

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Reversing the Damage: How the Federal Liberals can restore Hope on the Prairies

By 2013 the Conservative government had cut overall federal taxes and other revenues to the lowest rate seen in more than 70 years. Between 2011 and March 2015, 25,000 to 30,000 federal public sector positions were eliminated. Between 2010 and 2015, 4,766 civil service jobs were lost in the prairie region (1,875 in Manitoba; 799 in Saskatchewan; 2,092 in Alberta).

Valuable services such as those provided by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Veterans Affairs, Employment and Social Development Agency, front line Canada Revenue staff and National Parks conservation and maintenance programs were and will be diminished by these cuts if they are not halted. A new report from the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues examines how the prairie region is being affected by these cuts and recommends how funding and programs be restored.

In his September 25th Open Letter to Canada's Public Servants, Prime Minister Trudeau promised to respect and work with government employees and restore service levels to Veterans Affairs and offices that provide EI and CPP services. He also promised to forge a new relationship with Canadian scientists, some of whom would have worked on four federal agricultural programs that had many positive impacts on the prairies. As this report explains, these programs were cut by the Conservatives despite the abundance of evidence – in some cases over decades – that they delivered important economic, social and environmental results.

Veterans Affairs staff has been reduced by 24 percent with approximately 900 jobs

lost across the country. On the prairies, Brandon and Saskatoon will see their staff reduced from five and 14 respectively to one staff member for each office – both of whom now work for Service Canada rather than in offices dedicated to Veteran Affairs. The impact on veterans seeking help with pensions, access to disability payments and health services will be considerable, especially for those Veterans with limited mobility or lack of access to transportation.

If not halted, by 2017 cuts to Employment and Social Development Canada will halve the staff dealing with Canadians calling in for information about Employment Insurance (EI). Between 2011 and 2013, 26 million calls to the EI helpline were blocked and more than a million callers hung up before being served. We do not have access to figures for the prairie region, but one employee noted that: “we lost hundreds of staff across the region when offices consolidated and closed”.

Despite being understaffed, overtime has been cut for officers processing CPP applications, resulting in “[. . .] an increased backlog in various types of Canada Pension Plan applications. The increased backlog creates stress for all levels of processing in CPP [. . .].”

Program and staff spending has been cut in Canada's National Parks as well. The report also explains how important scientific research on wildlife in the Parks across the region has been cut, leaving concerns about how much knowledge we are losing regarding environmental degradation and species extinction.

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IN LABOUR ISSUES

“The overwhelming success of the Community Pastures Program is due to the benefits of a community ‘commons’ approach which will be difficult to maintain with pastures in private hands.”

The loss of the following four acclaimed agricultural programs will also have long lasting, negative results for communities, families, the economy and the environment.

The closure of the Beef Cattle Program at the Brandon Research and Development Centre not only cut jobs, it removed the economic activity that sustained one of the largest research herds in western Canada (800 head). Local producers of fuel, building material, feed and bedding, as well as local veterinarians have noticed the loss and producers are worried about the loss of local research which considers the specific conditions they deal with.

The 2012 closure of the Cereal Research Centre at the University of Manitoba led to concerns about the private-sector takeover of the centre’s seed-breeding program. Public investment in plant breeding has been a key part of the foundation of Canada’s multi-billion dollar grain industry. Up to 50 percent of the wheat and oat crops in Canada come from varieties developed at the centre, and that public investment gives very high returns: for every dollar invested, twenty dollars is returned. When this sort of research is privatized, smaller portions of returns are re-invested in new research.

The Prairie Shelterbelt Program – shut-down in 2012 - provided crucial support for carbon sequestration, biodiversity, soil and water conservation and preservation of wildlife habitat. Started in 1901, the program provided over 600 million trees to rural landowners. The program was turned over to a non-profit organization which ultimately could not keep things running. Now abandoned, the nursery’s 3 million seedlings are overgrown with weeds and it seems unlikely that the program can be saved.

The federal government’s Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) started in 1935 to deal with the devastation of the Dust Bowl. It included initiatives to deal with erosion, water access, irrigation and grass management through the Community Pastures Programs. These pastures are found in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba and cover over 2 million acres in total. Manitoba’s and Saskatchewan’s pastures were run federally, but the Conservative’s omnibus Bill-C38 transferred control to Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan plans to sell or lease the pastures, thereby transferring its obligation to conserve and protect the land into private hands.

The overwhelming success of the Community Pastures Program is due to the benefits of a community ‘commons’ approach which will be difficult to maintain with pastures in private hands. When a common resource is properly managed with an eye to protecting its profit-generating aspect (the cattle) and the environment, a delicate balance between human activity and natural processes allows both to flourish. The dismembering of the program will make this balance difficult to maintain.

All these program cuts were framed in the logic of austerity, but the Conservatives wasted more resources than they saved and introduced inefficiencies that affect us all. The report explains that if the Liberal government does not act on its promises to reinstate the programs, future generations will have to deal with the consequences of loss of valuable services, employee burn-out and illness, deterioration of the environment and yet one more example of the tragedy of the commons.

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