Our Schools/Our Selves

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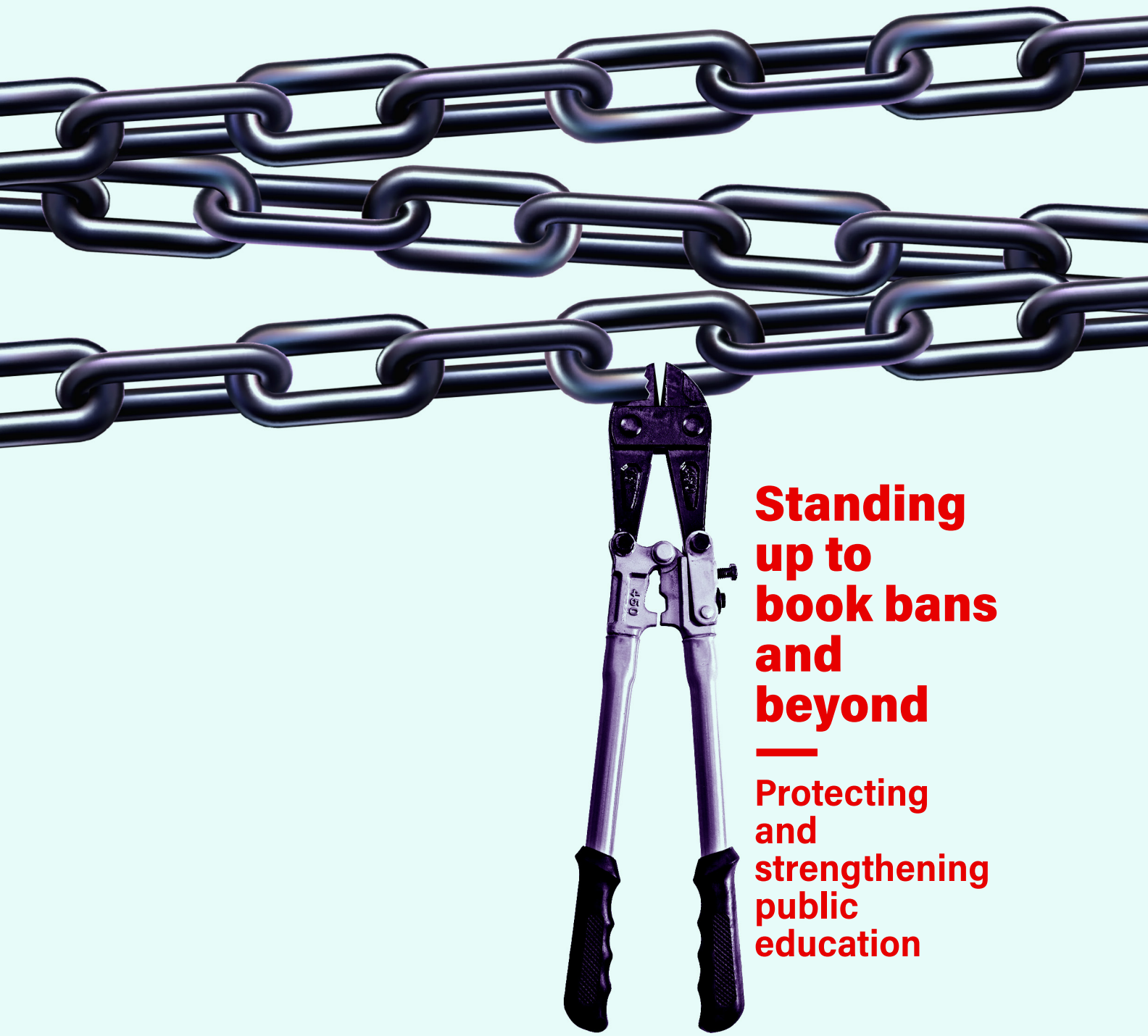

Standing up to book bans and beyond

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Protecting and strengthening public education

Erika Shaker

The fourth R stands for "resistance"

> "Yeah, we need to invent a crisis, and that's not just an act of courage; there's some skill involved."
>
> *—John Snobelen, Minister of Education, Ontario 1995*

People of a certain age may remember when then-Ontario Education Minister John Snobelen, (in)famously a high school dropout, was caught ruminating about the need to create a crisis in education to justify its overhaul. He also referred to students as clients, parents as customers, and teachers as "front line service providers" in an interview forebodingly titled "For Whom the Bell Tolls" shortly after assuming this key role in Mike Harris's Common Sense Revolution.

A push-poll was conducted, clearly designed to whip up public sentiment against public education. The Education Quality Improvement Act (Bill 160), funding cuts and centralization of authority followed. And at the end of October 1997, unions and the public rallied in a two week period of strikes and protests across Ontario.

On November 10, the strike ended when, one by one, education union leadership instructed members to return to work—despite polling indicating a majority of the public supported the teachers. And on December 1, 1997, Bill 160 became law.

Cuts to public education In Ontario—or across Canada, for that matter, as provincial governments follow a similar template—did not begin in December 1997. And they certainly didn't end when the Ontario Conservatives were voted out in 2003. But this current moment is a reminder of what's at stake when we assume progress, or support for the public institutions that make progress possible, is a given. And it provides a useful and increasingly relevant roadmap of the regressive forces that have never vanished, particularly when it comes to limiting their influence and authority.

Public institutions and infrastructure hold a mirror up to society and are also expected

to compensate for (or absorb) society's inadequacies. The first role—as a mirror—reflects how the State has either invested in and supported communities, particularly those most vulnerable—or not. The second role is indicative of what happens when the State neglects its first responsibility, and how public services (and those who staff them) are expected to respond, often with fewer and fewer resources, in some cases as the last line of defence against the ferocity of neoliberalism.

Inequality is skyrocketing. Wages are not keeping pace with basic needs. Housing is increasingly financialized. Provincial and federal governments aren't doing even the bare minimum to deal with the crisis in post-secondary education and training. Cuts to the federal public service stand to decimate programs that we all depend on—to pay for a massive funding increase to National Defence.

This is where public education is situated—at a time when provincial governments continue to underfund and underresource, as class sizes grow, as special needs programs are shortchanged, and as control is centralized.

And as educators, students and their families pay the price—in communities across the country.

The authors in this issue explore what students, educators and school communities are grappling with in the absence of provincial leadership that sees public education as a system and a service to be prioritized rather than a budget to be decimated.

From rising violence, to the deliberate use of pronouns and gender identity as a distraction and as an outrage trigger, to the denigration of certain degrees as akin to "basketweaving," to book bans, to (more) cuts to student assistance, to governments using mechanisms to sidestep their legal obligations, public institutions are under attack.

But as these articles also demonstrate, workers, educators, and students are pushing back, in defense of their rights and in defense of the public education system and the students and communities it services.

It bears mentioning that 30 years later we are exactly where advocates warned us we would be when John Snobelen waxed poetic about creating a crisis in education. The difference is that subsequent provincial governments right across the country—within a federal framework that seems intent to willingly shrink to a bathtub sized version of itself (google Grover Norquist)—have steadily, relentlessly chipped away at the funding infrastructure that keeps our schools viable, and the democratic mechanisms that help ensure public responsiveness and community engagement, under the rhetorical guise of "efficiency" and "accountability."

If we are to learn anything from the decades of activism, it is that progress is never a given, that the fight for justice and equality is ongoing, and that building empathetic and compassionate communities is a full time commitment.

We are as indebted as we were back in the 90s to those who continue to remind us, every day, in word and deed, that while the stakes are high, so too must be our standards when it comes to shaping the world as we want it to be....and what we must do to get there. /OS

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CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law:

Guarantee of Rights and Freedoms

1. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

Fundamental Freedoms

2. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms: (*a*) freedom of conscience and religion; (*b*) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication; (*c*) freedom of peaceful assembly; and (*d*) freedom of association.

Democratic Rights

3. Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein. 4.(1) No House of Commons and no legislative assembly shall continue for longer than five years from the date fixed for the return of the writs at a general election of its members. (2) In time of real or apprehended war, invasion or insurrection, a House of Commons may be continued by Parliament and a legislative assembly may be continued by the legislature beyond five years if such continuation is not opposed by the votes of more than one-third of the members of the House of Commons or the legislative assembly, as the case may be. 5. There shall be a sitting of Parliament and of each legislature at least once every twelve months.

Mobility Rights

6.(1) Every citizen of Canada has the right to enter, remain in and leave Canada. (2) Every citizen of Canada and every person who has the status of a permanent resident of Canada has the right (*a*) to move to and take up residence in any province; and (*b*) to pursue the gaining of a livelihood in any province. (3) The rights specified in subsection (2) are subject to (*a*) any laws or practices of general application in force in a province other than those that discriminate among persons primarily on the basis of province of present or previous residence; and (*b*) any laws providing for reasonable residency requirements as a qualification for the receipt of publicly provided social services. (4) Subsections (2) and (3) do not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration in a province of conditions of individuals in that province who are socially or economically disadvantaged if the rate of employment in that province is below the rate of employment in Canada.

Legal Rights

7. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice. 8. Everyone has the right to be secure against unreasonable search or seizure. 9. Everyone has the right not to be arbitrarily detained or imprisoned. 10. Everyone has the right on arrest or detention (*a*) to be informed promptly of the reasons therefor; (*b*) to retain and instruct counsel without delay and to be informed of that right; and (*c*) to have the validity of the detention determined by way of *habeas corpus* and to be released if the detention is not lawful. 11. Any person charged with an offence has the right (*a*) to be informed without unreasonable delay of the specific offence; (*b*) to be tried within a reasonable time; (*c*) not to be compelled to be a witness in proceedings against that person in respect of the offence; (*d*) to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law in a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal; (*e*) not to be denied reasonable bail without just cause; (*f*) except in the case of an offence under military law tried before a military tribunal, to the benefit of trial by jury where the maximum punishment for the offence is imprisonment for five years or a more severe punishment; (*g*) not to be found guilty on account of any act or omission unless, at the time of the act or omission, it constituted an offence under Canadian or international law or was criminal according to the general principles of law recognized by the community of nations; (*h*) if finally acquitted of the offence, not to be tried for it again and, if finally found guilty and punished for the offence, not to be tried or punished for it again; and (*i*) if found guilty of the offence and if the punishment for the offence has been varied between the time of commission and the time of sentencing, to the benefit of the lesser punishment. 12. Everyone has the right not to be subjected to any cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. 13. A witness who testifies in any proceedings has the right not to have any incriminating evidence so given used to incriminate that witness in any other proceedings, except in a prosecution for perjury or for the giving of contradictory evidence. 14. A party or witness in any proceedings who does not understand or speak the language in which the proceedings are conducted or who is deaf has the right to the assistance of an interpreter.

Equality Rights

15.(1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Official Languages of Canada

16.(1) English and French are the official languages of Canada and have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and government of Canada. (2) English and French are the official languages of New Brunswick and have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the legislature and government of New Brunswick. (3) Nothing in this Charter limits the authority of Parliament or a legislature to advance the equality of status or use of English and French. 16.1(1) The English linguistic community and the French linguistic community in New Brunswick have equality of status and equal rights and privileges, including the right to distinct educational institutions and such distinct cultural institutions as are necessary for the preservation and promotion of those communities. (2) The role of the legislature and government of New Brunswick to preserve and promote the status, rights and privileges referred to in

the legislature of New Brunswick shall be printed and published in English and French and both language versions are equally authoritative. 19.(1) Either English or French may be used by any person in, or in any pleading in or process issuing from, any court established by Parliament. (2) Either English or French may be used by any person in, or in any pleading in or process issuing from, any court of New Brunswick. 20.(1) Any member of the public in Canada has the right to communicate with, and to receive available services from, any head or central office of an institution of the Parliament or government of Canada in English or French, and has the same right with respect to any other office of any such institution where (*a*) there is a significant demand for communications with and services from that office in such language; or (*b*) due to the nature of the office, it is reasonable that communications with and services from that office be available in both English and French. (2) Any member of the public in New Brunswick has the right to communicate with, and to receive available services from, any office of an institution of the legislature or government of New Brunswick in English or French. 21. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any right, privilege or obligation with respect to the English and French languages, or either of them, that exists or is continued by virtue of any other provision of the Constitution of Canada. 22. Nothing in sections 16 to 20 abrogates or derogates from any legal or customary right or privilege acquired or enjoyed either before or after the coming into force of this Charter with respect to any language that is not English or French.

Minority Language Educational Rights

23.(1) Citizens of Canada (*a*) whose first language learned and still understood is that of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province in which they reside, or (*b*) who have received their primary school instruction in Canada in English or French and reside in a province where the language in which they received that instruction is the language of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province, have the right to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in that language in that province. (2) Citizens of Canada of whom any child has received or is receiving primary or secondary school instruction in English or French in Canada, have the right to have all their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in the same language. (3) The right of citizens of Canada under subsections (1) and (2) to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction

Enforcement

24.(1) Anyone whose rights or freedoms, as guaranteed by this Charter, have been infringed or denied may apply to a court of competent jurisdiction to obtain such remedy as the court considers appropriate and just in the circumstances. (2) Where, in proceedings under subsection (1), a court concludes that evidence was obtained in a manner that infringed or denied any rights or freedoms guaranteed by this Charter, the evidence shall be excluded if it is established that, having regard to all the circumstances, the admission of it in the proceedings would bring the administration of justice into disrepute.

General

25. The guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed so as to abrogate or derogate from any aboriginal, treaty or other rights or freedoms that pertain to the aboriginal peoples of Canada including (*a*) any rights or freedoms that have been recognized by the Royal Proclamation of October 7, 1763; and (*b*) any rights or freedoms that now exist by way of land claims agreements or may be so acquired. 26. The guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed as denying the existence of any other rights or freedoms that exist in Canada. 27. This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians. 28. Notwithstanding anything in this Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are guaranteed equally to male and female persons. 29. Nothing in this Charter abrogates or derogates from any rights or privileges guaranteed by or under the Constitution of Canada in respect of denominational, separate or dissentient schools. 30. A reference in this Charter to a province or to the legislative assembly or legislature of a province shall be deemed to include a reference to the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories, or to the appropriate legislative authority thereof, as the case may be. 31. Nothing in this Charter extends the legislative powers of any body or authority.

Application of Charter

32.(1) This Charter applies to the Parliament and government of Canada in respect of all matters within the authority of Parliament including all matters relating to the Yukon Territory and Northwest Territories; and (*b*) to the legislature and government of each province, in respect of all matters within the authority of the legislature of each province. (2) Notwithstanding subsection (1), section 15 shall not have effect until three years after this section comes into force. 33.(1) Parliament or the legislature of a province may expressly declare in an Act of Parliament or of the legislature, as the case may be, that the Act or a provision thereof shall operate notwithstanding a provision included in section 2 or sections 7 to 15 of this Charter. (2) An Act or a provision of an Act in respect of which a declaration made under this section is in effect shall have such operation as it would have but for the provision of this Charter referred to in the declaration. (3) A declaration made under subsection (1) shall cease to have effect five years after it comes into force or on such earlier date as may be specified in the declaration. (4) Parliament or the legislature of a province may re-enact a declaration made under subsection (1). (5) Subsection (3) applies in respect of a re-enactment made under subsection (4).

Citation

34. This Part may be cited as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Will Paul

The “notwithstanding clause”

Or, how to avoid the Charter of Rights

> The clause was designed to be invoked by legislatures in exceptional situations, and only as a last resort after careful consideration. It was not designed to be used by governments as a convenience or as a means to circumvent proper process.
>
> —Roy Romanow and Roy McMurtry, Attorneys General of Saskatchewan and Ontario, 1981

The “clause” in question is the “notwithstanding clause,” also known as Section 33 of Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Over the past few years, premiers have come to see it as a handy tool to avoid court challenges over questionable or controversial legislation. The practice is making a joke of democracy, and the problem is getting worse.

What the notwithstanding clause does

Section 33 allows Parliament or provincial legislatures to enact laws notwithstanding some of the rights provisions of the Charter. These include fundamental freedoms: of conscience, belief and expression; of the press; of peaceful assembly and association such as the right to strike (Charter, Section 2).

Using Section 33 in relation to a particular law, governments may bypass basic rights like that of life, liberty and security of the person, protection from unreasonable search and seizure, arbitrary arrest and detention and right to trial within a reasonable time. This applies also to protections from cruel and unusual punishment and self-incrimination. Section 33 allows governments to suspend Charter principles of equality before the law (Charter, Sections 7 through 15).

Governments have used it to pass laws they fear might not meet the constitutional smell test of Canada's court system.

Section 33 stays in effect for five years, but may be renewed indefinitely. With respect to a certain piece of legislation it can render key rights in the Charter meaningless.

Section 33: A pistol on the wall

Peter Biro is a lawyer and founder of Section 1, an organization formed to stave off democratic backsliding. In conversation, he explained the dramatic principle of Chekhov's pistol. The writer once noted: "If in Act 1 you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act. Otherwise, don't put it there."1 Biro likens this to psychology of the political theatre: if a tool is available it's going to be used.

That pistol was hung on the wall in November 1981 when the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau was searching for a way to get provincial buy-in for the proposed Charter. Premiers wanted a balance between Charter rights and provincial power in areas like those prescribed in Sections 2 and 7 through 15. Section 33, the "notwithstanding clause", was a compromise between the federal and provincial governments to insure the Charter came into being.2 At the time, Biro explained, the Charter's framers thought it would be used rarely—only as a last resort.

But some politicians found Section 33 just too tempting. It has been invoked over two dozen times since its inception, and while nearly half of these instances were in the 80s as part of Quebec's protest against the constitution, there has been a significant uptick in governments using Section 33 as a relatively recent and worsening phenomenon to justify the violation of rights.

It has been used over the years to enable:

- Quebec to limit the use of English in outdoor signs to that of half the size of French (Bill 178, 1988)

- Saskatchewan to enact back-to-work legislation (Bill 144, 1986 p52) and overrule a court decision to cut funding for non-Catholic students attending Catholic schools (2017)

- Alberta to declare that marriage was legitimate only between two people of the opposite sex (Bill 202, 2000). Section 33 lapsed in 2005 and wasn't restored

- New Brunswick to override non-medical exemptions to its vaccination rules (2019)

- Quebec to ban public sector workers like educators, lawyers and peace officers from wearing religious garb—"clothing, a symbol, jewelry, an adornment, an accessory or headwear…" (Bill 21, 2019). In 2025, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government introduced Bill 9 to extend these secularism rules to ban praying in public parks and streets without a permit and serving so-called religious food without a secular option. Section 33 was applied pre-emptively to shield the bill from legal challenge.

- The Ford government of Ontario to set time limits for third party political advertising (Bill 307, 2021). Bill 307 was overturned by the Ontario Court of Appeal, a decision upheld by the Supreme Court in March 2023. That decision was based on Canadians' constitutional right to vote, something not covered by Section 33.

- Québec to investigate alleged breaches of its language laws regarding the amount of French used by the public and businesses—notwithstanding protections from arbitrary search and seizure held within the Charter (Bill 96, 2022)

- Ontario to pass back-to-work legislation against low-paid education workers (Bill 28, 2022)

- Saskatchewan to require schools to obtain parental permission for students to use their preferred names or gender identity. Saskatchewan also allowed parents to opt their children out of sexual health education. (Bill 174, 2023)

- Alberta to protect four pieces of legislation: one that broke a strike and three that interfered with the rights of trans youth.

Where are the righteous causes, imperative to preserve fragile provincial rights described in the above examples? The Ford government was facing an election and was worried about the amount of money public groups could raise to oppose them. Saskatchewan, Ontario and Alberta

used Section 33 to avoid the hassle of defending union-busting in the courts.

Whatever Québec lawmakers might say about diversity and respect, it's meaningless in light of its authoritarian moves to preserve "laicity of the state." How does the CAQ credibly justify any of its protected legislation designed to shelter independent-minded people from predations like praying in public, eating religious food or wearing religious symbols? Labour lawyer Susan Ursel calls this secular posturing "hypocritical." The state-as-religion is invoked in the place of what practices people choose to observe. She adds that using Section 33 to pull this off, undermines the political structure, social norms and consensus of what we value in this society.

What about Alberta's justification for shutting down challenges to its laws concerning gender? Where is the evidence to support this intrusion into doctor-patient relationships? What overwhelming social need justifies restricting kids from choosing their names and pronouns? From excluding Trans women from playing in women's sport? Questions like these are swept off the table with Section 33.

Section 33 enables governments to keep ill-conceived and malicious laws in place while muffling courts' fundamental democratic role of challenging them. Its use is becoming a fact of life rather than cause for outcry. Peter Biro calls this habituation—one of several major threats to democracy he outlined in a recent Massey Lecture. Autocracy doesn't only march in a column of ICE agents; it enters politics gradually, tolerated as people become used to suppression of liberal democratic norms and lower their standards for what is permissible.

Alberta: A closer look—four bills in a month

At the end of October, Smith's United Conservative Party (UCP) broke a 3-week strike of 51,000 teachers by applying Section 33 pre-emptively to back-to-work-legislation. So, in case the legislation was challenged in court, Section 33 would kick-in automatically and override it. Alberta teachers were forced back to work notwithstanding Charter protections over all of the sections noted above as well as . The UCP also ignored the Alberta Bill of Rights.

It was clear from the outset of the strike that the UCP was not in the mood to negotiate a settlement with teachers. It responded to teachers' demands, by immediately locking them out. After breaking their strike, it imposed a contract.

Smith and the UCP used the same tactic last in November 2025 to make sure that previous assaults on transgender rights wouldn't be jeopardized by appeals to the Charter. The provincial government It applied Section 33 to two pieces of legislation passed in 2024: Bill 26 banning the use of puberty blockers and reassignment surgery for trans youth, Bill 27 mandating permission from parents for kids under 16 to use their preferred name or pronoun in school; students over 16 would have to inform their parents. These two laws face court challenges: Bill 26 for interfering in doctor-patient relations and Bill 27 for its "unconstitutional attack on the rights of gender diverse youth in Alberta." More recently, Bill 29, prohibits athletes not designated female at birth from participating in women's sports. Danielle Smith said in a recent press conference that it was necessary to use Section 33 to avoid years of litigation—possibly to the Supreme Court.

These four pieces of legislation deserve the scrutiny of court challenges. But like other provincial legislatures, Alberta chose to avoid the inconvenience.

Regarding the back-to-work legislation, the Canadian Bar Association responded: "The government has invoked the notwithstanding clause before the Court has had an opportunity to examine the law and determine whether it constitutes a reasonable limit (to the Charter)... If the notwithstanding clause is to be invoked, it should only be used as a tool of last resort, after the Courts have had a chance to examine the legislation."

Section 33 was not a tool of last resort. The legislation was embargoed so the press couldn't release it to the public. The bill was a done deal.

Pushing back against Section 33

It's going to take a huge public outcry to preserve the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Charter. When Ontario used Section 33 to suspend the right to strike for low-paid education workers in 2022, it sparked a furor. CUPE members went on strike anyway, supported by the labour movement threatening a general strike. The Ford government beat a rapid retreat and repealed the offending Bill 28.

There are other options. Section 33 has no effect until a court rules that a law breaches certain Charter rights. Yet a law that might trip a Section 33 remains in force until it's

challenged—even if it violates the Charter. So, challenging the offending law illuminates the violation of Charter rights. That's what happened when the 2SLGBTQ+ rights group UR Pride contested Saskatchewan's 2023 policy requiring teachers to refer to students under age 16 by their birth names and pronouns. UR Pride argued this constituted a breach of the Charter's security of the person and equality provisions.

The Saskatchewan Court of King's Bench paused the policy, so the governing Saskatchewan Party promptly turned it into law and protected it with a pre-emptive application of Section 33. UR Pride came back with the argument that the law violated the Charter right to be free from cruel and unusual treatment. Even though this wouldn't stop the law from being enacted, UR Pride did get the Court to declare that it violated these students' Charter rights. Saskatchewan challenged that declaration, raised it to the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal and lost. Unwilling to let go of Chekhov's pistol, Saskatchewan has appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada.

The result? Saskatchewan has shone a bright light on its policy that harms vulnerable young people. Perhaps this case, while unfortunately not prompting the demise of Section 33, might help to stiffen the spines of those in a position to limit it. Some options:

- Introducing term limits to the application of Section 33 to laws so that it can't be used over and over to deny people Charter rights
- Declining to use Section 33 pre-emptively—at least waiting for courts to rule against a law that may violate people's rights.
- Limiting the Charter rights that may be violated by Section 33. Shield freedom of the press, belief, speech and association (Section 2), Life, liberty and security of the person protections (section 7), the prohibition of cruel and unusual treatment or punishment (section 12) and equality rights in (section 15).

Actions like these might impede the erosion of liberal democracy in Canada, but they won't happen without serious pressure on provincial governments that reach for autocracy to replace the inconvenience of governing with respect for people. /OS

William Paul is a retired principal and the editor of School Magazine.

Notes

1. Peter L. Biro, ed. "The Notwithstanding Clause and the Canadian Charter: Rights Reforms and Controversies," McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024 p.5

2. Thomas S. Axworthy, Chapter: "An Historic Canadian Compromise," in "The Notwithstanding Clause and the Canadian Charter: Rights Reforms and Controversies," McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024

Nigel Barriffe

When violence is the system speaking

What Ontario's schools are telling us

For the past several years, violence in Ontario schools has been discussed as though it were a series of isolated incidents: a child acting out, a classroom out of control, a teacher unable to cope. The dominant response has been managerial and individualizing—more reporting requirements, more surveillance, more discipline.

But violence does not emerge in a vacuum. It is produced. It accumulates. And when it becomes routine, it is often a signal that a system itself is under strain.

This is the central finding of a recent research project conducted with elementary educators in Toronto: what shows up in classrooms as "violent incidents" is, in many cases, the manifestation of chronic underfunding, staffing erosion, political neglect, and the offloading of social crises onto schools that are no longer equipped to absorb them.

This article is a report about that report—and a warning to the rest of the country.

A crisis years in the making

Since 2018, and after accounting for inflation, enrolment growth and unmet needs, the Ontario government has quietly removed billions of dollars from public education.

The political framing of education funding continues to rely on symbolic gestures rather than structural solutions. On March 10, Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Paul Calandra announced a $750 annual "classroom supply

card" for teachers, a policy framed publicly as support for students and educators. Yet the announcement came after years of cumulative funding erosion in Ontario's public education system—estimated at more than $6.5 billion since 2018. While the program represents roughly $63 million in new spending, educators across the province immediately pointed out that the same funds could instead support meaningful structural improvements such as hiring additional teachers, educational assistants, child and youth workers, and mental-health professionals. The contrast illustrates a broader pattern: highly visible political announcements that do little to address the systemic conditions producing stress, conflict, and violence inside schools.

In Toronto, where I teach, schools have experienced the steady disappearance of the very adults who make classrooms safe and functional: educational assistants, child and youth workers, social workers, psychologists, and specialist teachers. Supply teacher shortages have become chronic, increasingly filled by non-certified staff asked to manage classrooms without the training, authority, or support required to do so safely.

At the same time, school buildings have deteriorated. Deferred maintenance has left many schools overcrowded, inaccessible, and physically unsafe.

These material conditions matter. They shape how students experience school, how educators respond under pressure, and whether conflict escalates or is de-escalated.

What the data now shows—and what educators have been saying for years—is that violence rises precisely where supports disappear.

What the research found

The violence research project led by Dr. Stephanie Fearon draws on educators' collective narratives to document how teachers experience, interpret, and respond to violent incidents in schools. What emerges is not a story of "bad kids" or "failing teachers," but of professionals navigating impossible conditions.

Educators described classrooms where students with significant unmet needs were placed without adequate support. They spoke of repeated violent incidents that were normalized, underreported, or quietly reframed as "part of the job." Many described the moral injury of caring deeply for students while being denied the resources required to keep anyone safe—including the students themselves.

Crucially, the research documents how violence is experienced not only as physical harm, but as emotional, psychological, and cumulative. Teachers described hypervigilance, exhaustion, and fear—not because they lacked skill or commitment, but because the system had withdrawn its care.

Violence, in this framing, becomes a form of communication: a child's last resort in a system that no longer responds to need with support.

The political context we cannot ignore

It is impossible to understand what is happening in Ontario schools without situating it within the broader political moment.

Across North America, we are witnessing a resurgence of right-wing populism that thrives on division, scapegoating, and austerity. Teachers, immigrants, trans communities, and public sector workers are increasingly framed as the problem—blamed for affordability crises and social instability that are, in fact, the result of deliberate policy choices.

In Toronto, this climate has been made visible through the repeated presence of far-right groups mobilizing under the banner of "re-immigration" and anti-trans panic. These groups rallied multiple times in public spaces—including Christie Pits Park, where my own child plays, as well as Queen's Park and City Hall.

Each time, they were met by something just as important to name: a powerful public clap-back. Residents from across the city—parents, educators, neighbours, union members, students—consistently outnumbered them. The response was collective, grounded, and unmistakable: Toronto rejected the politics of hate.

And yet, at each of these mobilizations, the Toronto Police Service protected the far-right demonstrators while directing force toward counter-protesters. In one recent action, a counter-protester who was not resisting or threatening anyone suffered a broken hip during a police intervention. In this case, no meaningful public accountability followed. More broadly, despite repeated documentation of disproportionate police force against Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities in Toronto and across Canada, structural accountability remains limited. Investigations occur; systemic consequences rarely do.

The pattern is not invisible; it is tolerated. Accountability remains absent.

The dynamic extends beyond far-right mobilizations. On March 5, 2026, hundreds of students gathered at Queen's Park to protest the Ford government's planned cuts to post-secondary student grant funding and changes to tuition policy. Organizers from the Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario later reported that Toronto police used force while dispersing demonstrators, arresting two students and, according to witnesses and circulating video footage, striking at least one young protester who had been participating peacefully. Police later stated that officers were responding to vandalism and interference with arrests, but the images of officers using force against students protesting education cuts quickly spread online. Whether interpreted as crowd control or excessive force, the incident reinforced a troubling perception among many young people: that political dissent around education funding is met with repression rather than dialogue.

This contradiction matters because it reshapes the conditions in which public institutions operate. When communities see force used disproportionately and accountability diluted, public trust erodes. When educators watch colleagues disciplined for raising equity concerns, morale weakens. And when already marginalized students experience over-surveillance outside school and under-support inside it, systemic inequality deepens. These dynamics are connected, not coincidental.

Recent developments at Queen's Park illustrate this democratic erosion in real time. The Ontario government has proposed retroactive changes to the province's Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act that the Information and Privacy Commissioner warns would prevent the public from accessing government records held by the Premier, cabinet ministers, and political staff. The move follows a court ruling ordering the release of call logs from Premier Doug Ford's personal phone used for government business—and signals a troubling willingness to change transparency rules when independent oversight challenges political power.

Schools do not exist outside this climate. They absorb its consequences. When housing is unaffordable, when mental-health services are backlogged, when child and youth workers are cut, when families lose income supports, the crisis does not disappear—it relocates. It arrives in classrooms. And without adequate staffing, psychologists, social workers, or educational assistants, classroom teachers are left to manage failure as if it were an individual shortcoming.

Who benefits from the blame game

Right-wing populism depends on misdirection. Working—and middle-class families—struggling with affordability, housing, and precarity are told that the problem is trans people, immigrants, or teachers. In this narrative, teachers function as a proxy for public sector workers more broadly: visible, unionized, and therefore politically useful as scapegoats.

But the math does not lie.

The real beneficiaries of austerity are Canada's billionaire class: figures like Galen Weston, the Irving family, and real-estate and grocery conglomerates whose profits have soared while public services have been stripped bare. Violence grows not because communities are too diverse, but because wealth is hoarded while care is defunded.

Violence as a policy outcome

One of the most important contributions of the research on violence is its refusal to treat violence as a behavioural anomaly. Instead, it positions violence as a predictable outcome of policy decisions.

When supports are removed, when class sizes grow, when children's mental-health needs go unmet, when families are pushed into precarity, schools become the place where all of that pressure surfaces. Teachers are asked to compensate for failures in housing, healthcare, social services, and income support—without training, staffing, or authority.

Violent incident reports, then, are not simply records of harm. They are data points that map the consequences of austerity.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission has already documented this reality. In its report Dreams Delayed, the Commission details how chronic underfunding, inadequate staffing levels, oversized classes, and the erosion of student supports contribute to systemic anti-Black racism and unsafe learning environments across Ontario's public education system.

The report calls for conditions that allow educators to build relationships, respond to student needs, and intervene early—including sufficient staffing, manageable class sizes, and the resources required to create safe, inclusive schools. These recommendations are not optional. They are human rights obligations, and the Ford government has largely failed to act on them.

When governments fail to implement human-rights guidance and then express surprise at

rising violence, what we are witnessing is not mismanagement. It is negligence.

Control, fear, and the erosion of democratic schools

The situation in Ontario has been further exacerbated by provincial interventions into school boards, including Toronto's. Framed as fiscal necessity, these moves function as political control: sidelining local governance, narrowing debate, and creating a culture of fear.

As Vice-President of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto, I speak daily with educators across the city. What they describe is consistent and alarming: fear of naming racism, fear of being publicly mischaracterized or privately disciplined. Since the Education Minister appointed Rohit Gupta to the position of Toronto District School Board's supervisor, that fear has intensified. Reporting violence is encouraged rhetorically, but punished in practice. In recent cases I am directly involved in as a union representative, educators who reported systemic anti-Black racism or raised concerns about unsafe conditions found themselves facing investigations, professional complaints, or administrative retaliation. While formal processes are ongoing and confidentiality must be respected, the chilling effect is unmistakable. When speaking up carries professional risk, silence becomes self-protection.

A culture of fear does not need to be formally declared to be real; it only requires enough examples to reshape behaviour.

Most recently, the Minister reversed trustee decisions and increased class sizes—a move that directly contradicts both research and lived experience, and one that predictably intensifies stress, conflict, and unmet need inside classrooms.

Why I believe this so deeply

I write this not only as a union leader, but as someone shaped by this system.

I was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and immigrated to Toronto as a baby with my parents. I went from Kindergarten through Grade 12 in the Toronto District School Board. Years later, I returned as an elementary school teacher, teaching in the same working-class communities that raised me—including Greenholme Junior Middle School in Rexdale, a neighbourhood shaped by immigrant families doing everything they can to make life work with dignity.

I have seen this system from the inside and the outside: as a student, as an educator, as a parent, and now as an organizer. I am also President of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, an organization that has spent more than 50 years documenting how racism, austerity, and state neglect intersect. That intersection is not theoretical. It is what shows up in classrooms every day.

Through tools like the Building Better Schools funding cuts calculator, we can trace exactly how much funding has been stripped from individual neighbourhood schools—millions of dollars removed from communities that need investment the most, even as provincial rhetoric insists restraint is unavoidable.

The violence documented in this report is not abstract to me. It is personal—and it is political.

A national warning

Ontario is not unique. What is happening here is a preview.

In Alberta, teachers and parents organized around class size, complexity, and safety—only to have their rights curtailed through the use of the notwithstanding clause. Rather than address the substance of educators' concerns, the government chose coercion.

When governments respond to social crisis by suspending democratic norms instead of funding solutions, we should name that trajectory honestly.

Resistance, organizing, and the way forward

The final—and perhaps most important—finding of the violence research is that educators are not passive. Despite fear, injury, and exhaustion, they continue to organize, document, and advocate—not for punishment, but for care.

The same spirit of resistance is visible beyond classrooms as students, parents, and communities mobilize to defend public education—even when those mobilizations are met with hostility or force.

Teachers are demanding smaller classes, more adults in schools, robust mental-health supports, and systems that respond to harm with repair rather than denial. They are building collective strategies through unions, health-and-safety committees, and community alliances.

This is where hope resides.

Violence in schools will not be reduced through surveillance, discipline, or silence. It will

be reduced through investment, solidarity, and democratic accountability.

The violence report offers documentation—but it is also an invitation: to listen to educators, to follow the data, and to refuse the lie that austerity is inevitable.

If we ignore what schools are telling us now, the costs will only grow—not just for teachers, but for children, families, and the democratic institutions that public education is meant to sustain. /OS

Nigel Barriffe is Vice-President of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto and President of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations. A Toronto District School Board educator, he writes and organizes at the intersection of public education, anti-racism and democratic accountability.

Who pays the debt sentence?

Currently, students in Ontario receive up to 85 per cent of their Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) aid in the form of grants, depending on their financial situation, and the rest as loans.

Under new rules implemented by the province under Premier Ford, grants will make up a maximum of 25 per cent of the aid…which means that students who are reliant on OSAP will now accumulate significantly more debt.

According to the 2023 Survey of Financial Security (SFS), 13.9 per cent of households in Ontario have student debt—nearly 887,000 households.

Who is most affected by student debt, and what does this burden mean?

- Racialized households in Ontario are twice as likely to have student debt.
- A large share of households carrying student debt face considerable financial insecurity. That debt burden is evident across households of all ages, not only among young people starting their careers.


HANDS OFF OUR OSAP!
THIS MAN ATE MY OSAP MONEY
WHEN THE KIDS TALK ABOUT "HAVING A FUTURE"
BYE BYE AFFORDABLE EDUCATION


$ 4 EDUCATION
Not for Canadian
EMPERIALISM
BLAME THE TYRANTS NOT THE MIGRANTS
EDUCATION SHOULDN'T BE A DEBT SENTENCE

- Households with student debt in Ontario are nearly three times more likely to fall behind on their bills.
- Households with student debt in Ontario are twice as likely to borrow money through payday loans.
- One in three households with student debt in Ontario is living paycheque to paycheque.

Targeted financial aid is not the end game; tax-funded free post-secondary education is. Still, OSAP served as a ladder for students trying to catch up economically with peers who started much further ahead. The Ontario government has just kicked away that ladder.

For more information, see Kicking Away the Ladder: The true cost of changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program, available at policyalternatives.ca. /OS

Félix Cauchy-Charest

First they came for the unions: How governments learned to love union busting

From Quebec's classrooms to Alberta's oilfields to a flight attendant defying a back-to-work order at 35,000 feet: it's the same fight, the same enemy

I work as a communications advisor for a major union in Quebec. I organize parents at my kids' school. I sit on a school board. I'm a fairly militant person. And as a political science major, I spend a lot of time thinking about power: who has it, how it moves, and what happens when it gets taken away.

So when I tell you that what is happening right now to workers' rights in Quebec, and across Canada and the world, feels like something we will look back on with real grief, I am not being dramatic. I am paying attention.

What has unfolded in Quebec over the past two years is not a series of administrative adjustments to labour law. It is a deliberate dismantling of the right to strike, the most powerful tool workers have ever held. The really maddening part is that the same playbook is running simultaneously in Alberta, in Ottawa, in London, in Washington. Different accents,

same script: silence workers, protect capital, and pretend it's in the interest of the former.

Nowhere is this more visible, or more consequential, than in education. The kindergarten teacher managing 25 kids in a crumbling school, the cégep instructor splitting time across three institutions, the university lecturer on a rolling six-month contract, the school support worker who is first on scene for a student in crisis: these workers have become the preferred target of governments that want to break labour power while, with a straight face, claiming it's in the public interest.

Quebec: Legault Balboa

François Legault's government started 2025 the way a boxer comes out of the corner in the final round: swinging hard and fast, not particularly interested in what the judges think.

Bill 89, adopted in May 2025 and in force since November 30, gives the Tribunal administratif du travail the power to order the maintenance of "essential services" during a strike, or simply suspend the right to strike altogether at the government's request. Every major union in Quebec denounced it. Law professor Finn Makela at the Université de Sherbrooke said the quiet part out loud in an article from Pivot: this law is the CAQ's revenge for the Front commun in 2023-2024, when over half a million workers walked off the job. Teachers, support staff, school psychologists, social workers: out together. They won. And the government did not forget.

Bill 101 (no, not the one you are thinking about), adopted in October 2025, imposed a two-tiered occupational health and safety regime on workers in education and healthcare—the sectors where the government sits across the bargaining table. Think about what that means for a teacher dealing with violent incidents in the classroom, a special education aide working with a student in crisis, a university research assistant in a poorly maintained lab—all of them now covered by weaker protections than workers in other sectors. Not surprisingly, the fines for illegal strike action went up significantly (because of course they did).

Then came Bill 3, and this one made me genuinely angry. Tabled October 30, 2025, it proposes splitting union dues into "principal" and "optional" categories. Core bargaining would be paid out of the principal dues. Everything else—including legal challenges, political advocacy, contesting laws before the courts, donating to charity—becomes "optional," requiring a separate vote specifically on those subjects. The pretext? Reinforcing union democracy and transparency. The real reason? Getting rid of an annoying check and balance for the government by limiting organized labour advocacy.

This is not reform. It's the quiet dismantling of the Rand Formula, the post-war compromise that has held Canadian labour relations together since 1945.

Alberta: The template

Quebec did not invent this strategy. It borrowed heavily from Alberta's Bill 32 in 2020 under the United Conservative Party. Bill 32 imported American-style union restrictions. It buried local unions in financial reporting requirements, made dues for advocacy beyond collective bargaining voluntarily opt-in, and classified everything from lobbying for COVID safety protocols to donating to a food bank as a "political cause" requiring explicit consent from members. For teachers' unions in Alberta, this was a gut punch: fighting for school funding, pushing for smaller class sizes, opposing education privatization, all of it suddenly classified as political activity requiring specific member authorization. Unifor called it what it was: the worst elements of U.S. labour law transplanted into Alberta, with the goal of draining union financial resources and restricting their ability to do much beyond negotiating collective agreements.

Alberta came back in December 2025 with a revised labour code under Bill 1, again drawing accusations of favouring employers over workers. Province-wide labour action was building heading into 2026. The cycle does not stop because workers keep losing; it stops when they push back hard enough. Alberta isn't there yet. Quebec is getting close.

Ottawa: Strikebreaking by phone

Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code is the subject of one of the most consequential labour stories of the past two years and far too many people still have no idea it exists.

It is a clause, tucked into federal law since 1984, that gives the Minister of Labour the power to direct the Canada Industrial Relations Board to end a labour dispute and impose binding arbitration, without going to Parliament, without a vote, without any public debate. It sat largely unused for decades until 2024 when the federal government "discovered" it.

In a single year, the federal government invoked Section 107 four times: against port workers in BC and Quebec, against rail workers at CN and CPKC (Canadian Pacific Kansas City Ltd) ending a lockout that had barely lasted a day, and against Canada Post workers on strike during the holiday season. In August 2025, it hit again: Air Canada flight attendants were ordered back to work less than 12 hours into their strike. A phone call from the Minister. A board ruling. Back to work.

The legal analysis is clear: when the government commits to ending every major work stoppage on economic grounds, employers have no reason to bargain seriously. Why negotiate in good faith when you can stall, lock out your workers, and wait for Ottawa to step in? Air Canada reportedly asked for federal intervention before the strike even started. Once it became clear that the flight attendants, facing fines and potential contempt charges, were going to hold the line regardless, the company reached a deal within 48 hours.

What this means for education workers is worth spelling out. The federal government has now demonstrated in practice that any sufficiently visible work stoppage can be ended by ministerial order. If postal workers can be sent back by phone call, why not university researchers the next time they strike? Why not CUPE members in federally funded institutions? The precedent is there. The tool is there. The question is how far the next government decides to push it.

CUPE, CUPW, the Teamsters, and the Canadian Labour Congress are all in court challenging Section 107. An NDP bill, C-247, calls for its outright repeal. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Mark Carney's 2025 budget proposed changes to collective bargaining for federal workers and announced 40,000 public service job cuts in the same document. The message is consistent: the economy is the priority. Workers are an annoying variable.

The global picture

According to the ITUC's 2025 Global Rights Index: the right to strike was violated in 131 countries, 87% of those surveyed, 44 more than in 2014. Eighty percent of countries severely restricted the right to collective bargaining. Europe, historically the most protected region, has seen the worst deterioration of any region over the past decade. Canada and the Americas hit their worst scores on record in 2025.

In Britain, the Conservative government's 2023 Strikes Act gave employers the power to issue "work notices" naming specific workers who, despite having voted to strike, were legally required to show up to work anyway. Teachers were among those targeted. Unions were then required to take "reasonable steps" to enforce compliance among their own members, advising them to comply, and reporting absences to the employer. The general secretary of the National Education Union said his union would strike to force school closures at any school that dismissed NEU members under the legislation. The ITUC ranked the UK at the same level as the United States: "systematic violation of rights." Of European countries, only Turkey and Belarus received a worse score.

The new Labour government eventually repealed the legislation. But the point had been made: in a wealthy liberal democracy, you can pass a law — without political consequence — that puts teachers in the position of crossing their own picket lines.

In the United States, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 has been restricting the right to strike for nearly 80 years. Secondary boycotts are banned. Employers can permanently replace striking workers, a practice normalized when Reagan fired the air traffic controllers in 1981. Trump's second administration went further: the National Labor Relations Board was rendered non-operational for nearly a year after Trump fired a board member to eliminate its quorum. Over a million federal workers lost their collective bargaining rights by executive order, what one labour historian called the largest single act of union-busting in American history. A Cornell labour expert summed it up: "This is great for employers, they have a non-functioning NLRB." Meanwhile, university faculty and support staff keep organizing in record numbers — regardless of what Washington does — because the conditions have become untenable .

France, Finland, Belgium, countries with deep post-war social contracts, have all moved to restrict strike action in recent years. This is not a series of unrelated policy choices. It is the same ideological project running at different speeds in different countries.

What these laws actually do

Every one of these laws comes packaged in reasonable language: "balance," "modernization," "essential services," "industrial peace." I've spent

enough years in communications to recognize what that packaging is designed to cover.

A strike that causes no disruption changes nothing. Workers' leverage is the capacity to withdraw their labour and make the withdrawal cost tangible . The moment governments commit to ending every significant work stoppage because it inconveniences the economy, collective bargaining becomes a performance with a known outcome. You negotiate, you reach an impasse, the government steps in for the employer. Rinse and repeat.

The "essential services" expansion is particularly dishonest, and education makes this obvious. Of course teaching is essential. But "essential" has been converted into a legal tool for prohibition. You cannot declare teachers essential to society and then cut their sick leave, stuff 30 kids or more into a classroom, eliminate the school psychologist position, and take away their right to walk out. That is not a social contract.

The dues restrictions, Alberta's proposed Bill 32, Quebec's Bill 3, the American right-to-work model they both drew from, are designed to limit what unions can do beyond signing contracts. For education unions specifically, this is serious. Teachers' unions have historically been among the most active civic institutions in their communities, funding legal challenges to bad laws, pushing back on education privatization, advocating for students who need more resources. That is exactly what these laws prevent.

The legal record

Quebec unions have filed challenges to Law 14. CUPW and CUPE are in Federal Court over Section 107. The NDP has introduced legislation to repeal it. The ITUC is documenting the global pattern.

This resistance is not nothing. It is also not sufficient on its own.

Rights in this country were not legislated into existence by generous governments. The Rand Formula came from a wartime strike in Windsor in 1945, where workers held out long enough that a judge had to build a new legal framework to settle it. The eight-hour day, paid leave, workplace safety standards, the right to a school day where teachers aren't also doing the work of a secretary, a social worker, and a custodian because the positions were cut: none of it was *offered*. It was won through sustained collective action.

The CAQ calls its laws modernization. Ottawa calls Section 107 industrial peace. The UCP called Bill 32 democratic transparency. But the actual goal is to make unions smaller, quieter, and less capable of causing problems for employers or governments. The machinery of the state is being used to do what employers have wanted for decades.

The Air Canada flight attendants who kept striking after the back-to-work order understood something basic: a right you won't defend stops being a right. They took the personal risk, and within 48 hours the company was at the table. The school workers in the Front commun held strong and came out with a better contract. The university lecturers organizing across North America on campuses that treat them as disposable are doing it because the alternative is worse.

I think about all of this when I sit in a parent assembly and listen to people talk about what's happening in their kids' classrooms. The fight over conditions in schools and the fight over whether the people who work in those schools have real bargaining power are the same fight. That connection is worth making explicit, before enough of it is gone that people stop noticing. /OS

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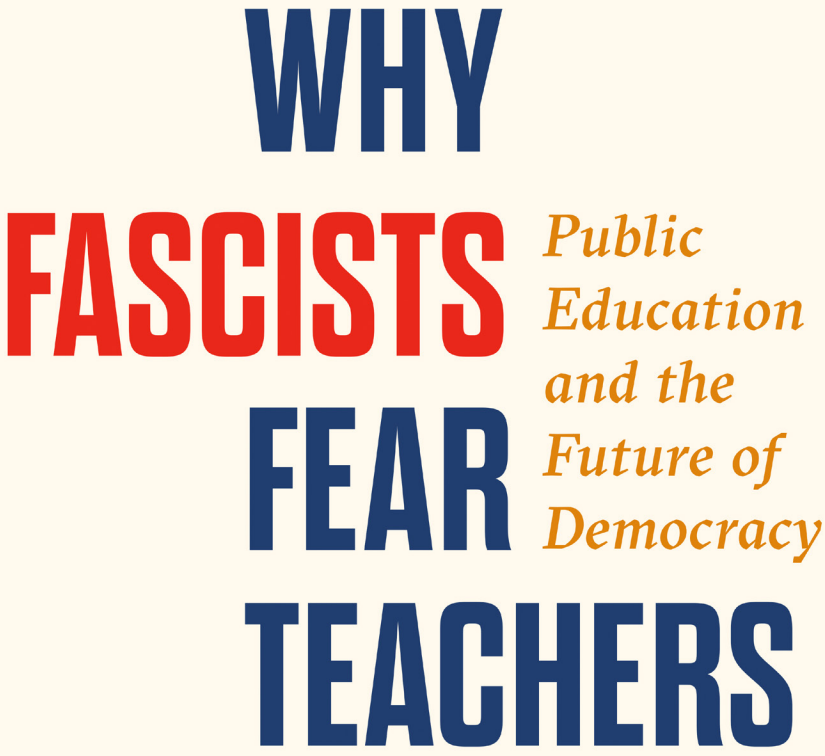

Heather Ganshorn

Book review

Why fascists fear teachers: Public education and the future of democracy

In the current political moment, teachers and public education are under attack in many parts of the world where far-right political movements are ascendant. As Randi Weingarten discusses in her latest book, *Why Fascists Fear Teachers: Public Education and the Future of Democracy,* this is a phenomenon with deep historical roots.

Weingarten is president of the American Federation of Teachers, the second-largest teachers' union in the USA. Here she lays out what she sees as the main reasons fascists, authoritarians, the far-right, and the oligarch class (groups that are not entirely synonymous, but are allied in this particular moment) feel threatened by teachers and by the institution of public education, and why they attack teachers while working to dismantle public education.

Much ink has been spilled equivocating over whether U.S. President Donald Trump and other far-right governments can be called fascist, with many people preferring more ambiguous language. But a problem must be named and understood to be acted on effectively, and it's refreshing to see someone of Weingarten's stature speak frankly about what's happening in the education landscape, and why.

In Jason Stanley's 2018 book *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them,* which Weingarten cites extensively, Stanley clarifies that "fascist politics" does not necessarily lead to state-level fascism, but should be recognized nonetheless for the danger it poses to democracy. Weingarten addresses the reluctance to use the f-word with the statement, "The perfect definition of fascism will be clear in the rearview

mirror—but by then it may be too late for our children and our country."

While many people who were reluctant to label Trump a fascist have admitted they were mistaken and acknowledged the current reality, Canadians may be reluctant to acknowledge fascist politics in our own context. The broader concept of "fascist politics" can guide our reflections on how many of the trends and events described by Weingarten are echoed in Canadian education systems. Culture-war attacks on public education as an institution, accusations of ideological indoctrination levelled at teachers, and a relentless push for privatization in order to undermine and defund public education are all features of current education politics in Canada.

Weingarten opens with a historical overview of the Norwegian teachers' resistance to the Nazi occupation in the 1940s, and the punishing consequences of that resistance. She then moves on to present-day authoritarian attacks on public education by Vladimir Putin, who has explained his reasoning with the statement, "Wars are won by teachers." She also describes how far-right activist Christopher Rufo has pioneered modern-day attacks on American public education, prosecuting what he calls a "narrative war" on public education in order to sow distrust. Rufo is one of the architects of the right-wing Project 2025, which aims to reshape the U.S. government in order to enact a suite of right-wing policies. Rufo also invented the panic around supposed "critical race theory" in schools.

The remainder of the book outlines the four main motivations that fascists have for attacking teachers.

First, teachers teach critical thinking, whereas fascism works to short-circuit critical thinking in favour of gut feelings of fear and rage. Angry and resentful people can be manipulated to believe the system is broken, and to place their trust in an authoritarian who promises to fix it. Fascists also understand that critical thinking makes young people more resistant to indoctrination and the types of simplistic messaging favoured by fascist politicians. Weingarten discusses measures that have been enacted in several states to restrict what teachers are allowed to teach, and identifies how teachers are fighting back.

Second, teachers (and public schools) create safe and welcoming communities for all children, while fascists oppose pluralism and seek to dehumanize various groups such as 2SLGBTQIA+students, Black students, and immigrants. Third, teachers fight for equity and opportunity for all children, while fascists believe in hierarchy and want to reinforce and widen existing class divides, many of which overlap with racial divides.

Finally, teachers build strong unions, which pose a threat to the oligarch class. Teachers' unions are some of the largest in America, and are therefore singled out by powerful interests. Weingarten outlines the privatization tactics that the billionaire class has employed for decades to weaken teachers' unions—expanding initiatives such as charter schools and school voucher programs. The hatred of unions stems in part from the political power these organizations hold, which can frustrate authoritarian ambitions. But Weingarten makes it clear how important teachers' unions are to the overall quality of public education, as collective bargaining often involves negotiations around supports for students. These gains for the most vulnerable students frustrate the fascist goal of maintaining existing social divisions.

The book's concluding section is unfortunately a little thin. Weingarten notes that she is writing this book in the early days of Donald Trump's second term, and describes his intentions to dismantle the federal Department of Education—intentions that he has since translated into action. Weingarten paints a bleak picture of the consequences of these actions for the country's most vulnerable students. She also gives a brief overview of how the Trump regime's attacks on education extend to colleges and universities.

Weingarten notes that fascist politics continues to pose an existential threat to students, and to democracy. However, she doesn't propose much in the way of action other than a statement that teachers will continue "to show up and stand up for the needs of our students." This seems like a pretty weak stance for the head of one of the country's largest unions. Weingarten finishes with some more thoughts on how public education and democracy are inextricably linked, but doesn't seem clear on how we can collectively resist authoritarian attacks on the public education system.

Despite this shortcoming, Weingarten provides a valuable service in diagnosing the pathologies behind the current attacks on public education. Coming up with a cure will be the urgent task of not only teachers, but parents, student activists and citizens who want to save their democracy. /OS

Heather Ganshorn is the Research Director for Support Our Students Alberta, a grassroots organization that advocates for fully funded, inclusive public education for all children.

James L. Turk

Parental rights and the surging demand for censorship in Canadian schools

When Demetrios Nicolaides, Alberta's Minister of Education, announced last May he was going to ban all sexually explicit books in Alberta school libraries, he immediately received effusive praise from Action4Canada, one of Canada's leading Christian far-right parental rights organizations.

> **"Action4Canada is pleased to announce A MASSIVE WIN in Alberta against the pornographic books! Most importantly, this is a victory for our precious children. PRAISE GOD!**
>
> "Thank you to the Alberta Minister of Education, Demetrios Nicolaides, for meeting with **Action4Canada's** team, responding to our concerns and acknowledging the evidence of sexually explicit materials in Alberta schools. It's a positive step toward restoring morality and common sense in education. **Action4Canada's** Calgary team has been working very hard behind the scenes, communicating with government officials over several months..."[1]

Holding up four young adult, coming-of-age graphic novels he claimed Alberta parents had brought to his attention, Minister Nicolaides declared he was going to impose new rules to ensure books like these four would no longer be available in any school libraries in the province. In July, he issued Ministerial Order (#030/2025)[2] banning from Alberta school libraries by September all "materials containing explicit sexual content" except "religious texts or scriptures." Further, the Order specified that

students below Grade 10 must not be permitted "to access school library materials containing non-explicit sexual content."

The Edmonton Public School Board dutifully complied by identifying all books in its school libraries that had a paragraph or a page or a chapter that could be deemed sexually explicit. The list of these books was leaked to the media, and there was immediate public outrage.

Several hundred titles were removed, including Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*; Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World;* Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*; Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*; Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners;* Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; Judy Blume, *Forever; and* Isabele Allende, *The House of the Spirits*.[3]

In response to this gross act of censorship, Margaret Atwood drafted a short story for teens that would be deemed "suitable" for Alberta school libraries, adding the work was necessary because the province's minister of education thought students were "stupid babies."

Her story was about two 17-year-olds, named John and Mary, who were "very, very good children."

"They never picked their noses or had bowel movements or zits."

"They grew up and married each other, and produced five perfect children without ever having sex"...they were ardent Christians who "paid no attention to what Jesus actually said about the poor" and instead "practised selfish rapacious capitalism" in the vein of the conservative literary hero Ayn Rand.

John and Mary lived happily ever after. "But, while they were doing that, *The Handmaid's Tale* came true and [Premier] Danielle Smith found herself with a nice new blue dress but no job,"—a reference to the high-ranking wives of commanders in her book who wore blue while the handmaids, in red garments, were subjected to produce children for elite couples in a totalitarian and theocratic state.[4]

Her story went viral.[5]

The outrage prompted the very embarrassed Minister to tell school boards they should pause any development or distribution of lists of books that are to be removed until further notice.[6] Less easily embarrassed, Premier Danielle Smith quickly announced the removals "will be paused for a couple of hours while the ministerial order is rewritten." Despite the fact that the Edmonton Public School Board had done exactly what the Minister's Order directed, Premier Smith accused it of "clearly doing a little vicious compliance over what the direction is."[7]

The "couple of hours" stretched into a month before a revised Ministerial Order was released in September which required school boards to remove all "school literary materials containing any explicit visual depiction of a sexual act."[8] Apparently, *written* descriptions of sexual activity were now permissible. The reality is that the intended target of the Minister's broad brush first order was young adult (YA) graphic novels, starting with the four he held up at his May 2025 initial press conference. As Danielle McLaughlin writes in a recent Centre for Free Expression blogpost, young adult graphic novels are accessible to teenagers who may have difficulty reading dense text that has no illustrations, and they help them to contend with and understand how others have dealt with such issues as bullying, sexual attraction, uncertainties about their bodies, and family strife.[9]

A closer look at the four YA graphic novels the Minister used to highlight what he wanted to ban tells its own story. All are highly regarded, award-winning young adult graphic novels that address difficult issues that deeply concern many teens.

A closer look at the four YA graphic novels the Minister used to highlight what he wanted to ban tells its own story. All are highly regarded, award-winning young adult graphic novels that address difficult issues that deeply concern many teens.

The first, Scott Thompson's *Blankets,* has been translated into more than 20 languages, received many book awards, and has been described by the *Guardian Weekly* as "One of the best graphic novels of all time" and by *Time* magazine as "a great American novel." *Publishers Weekly* 's review said, "Thompson manages to explore adolescent social yearnings, the power of young

love and the complexities of sexual attraction with a rare combination of sincerity, pictorial lyricism and taste."[10]

The second, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home,* has received widespread critical acclaim:

- *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review): "Bechdel's memoir offers a graphic narrative of uncommon richness, depth, literary resonance and psychological complexity... Though this will likely be stocked with graphic novels, it shares as much in spirit with the work of Mary Karr, Tobias Wolff and other contemporary memoirists of considerable literary accomplishment."

- *Library Journal* (starred review): "Bechdel... paints her own story in this stunning graphic memoir... One of the best graphic memoirs to date."

- *Time Magazine*: "At once a coming-out story, an examination of the complex relationship we can have with our parents, and the role of art and literature in processing our lives, first-time graphic novelist Alison Bechdel's Fun Home made for a stunning debut... Smart, darkly funny and a little fearless, Fun Home reads like a true-life modern American Gothic."

It, too, has been translated into many languages and received numerous book awards.[11]

The third, Mike Curato's *Flamer*, also has received widespread critical acclaim:[12]

- *School Library Journal* (starred review): "Curato has created a beautiful story of a teen who must decide if he will force himself into the mold of what he thinks a 'normal' boy is, or if he can allow himself to live life on his own terms. An essential book that shows readers that they are never alone in their struggles

- *Booklist* (starred review): "Just as his deft artwork meticulously balances between blazing feelings and quiet contemplation of natural beauty, Curato gives Aiden a poignantly well-rounded character: for all the homophobia and racism inherent in institutions like the Boy Scouts and the Catholic church, Aiden still defiantly finds inspiration and strength there. Masterfully nuanced and stunningly told, this is visual storytelling at its finest."

- *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review): "[T]he true star of this book is the writing, which describes a boy who could live in any decade on his journey of self-discovery. This is a story that will be read and reread, and for some, it will be the defining book of their adolescence."

Finally, Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer,* one of the most challenged books in the U.S., likewise has received good critical reviews, won literary awards, and been translated in multiple languages:

- *School Library Journal* (starred review): "It's also a great resource for those who identify as nonbinary or asexual as well as for those who know someone who identifies that way and wish to better understand."

- *Publisher's Weekly*: "This heartfelt graphic memoir relates, with sometimes painful honesty, the experience of growing up non-gender-conforming.... [It's] sure to spark valuable discussions at home and in classrooms."

- *San Francisco Book Review*: "Regardless of who you are or how you identify, this graphic novel will speak to you... Throughout this intensely honest and poignant memoir, Maia struggles with things like fitting in as a homeschooled kid, being terrified of puberty, and struggling to ask people to use their preferred pronouns... Maia Kobabe tells this story with such skill, beauty, and feeling that you won't be able to put it down or resist its magnetic emotional pull."

Action4Canada is not alone in trying to ban such books from all libraries in Canada. The number of parental rights groups (religious and secular) in Canada is growing, as is their zeal. They are putting active pressure on other provinces to act as Alberta has. Any success they achieve only inspires them to broaden their demands for what is to be removed.

For example, after praising God for Minister Nicolaides' book ban order, Action4Canada started a letter writing campaign, urging parents and others to sign a letter calling for a broad ban of what Action4Canada has labeled "SOGI123" materials[13] which for them consists of a list of 62 books[14] that are LGBTQ+ friendly, and/or discuss gender stereotyping, gender identity, issues of teen angst, family discord, and sexual orientation.

In a bold move, they also demanded that, in addition to the 62 specific titles, the library ban "any other titles by the same authors, plus any books of the same genre."[15]

Meanwhile, other parental rights groups are mobilizing. He is a sampling:

- **Concerned Citizens Canada** ["For the preservation of democracy, dignity and our way of life"][16] is using social media aggressively to ban books in schools. One of their tools is a series of Instagram reels targeting school divisions across Manitoba, titled "These books aren't in my kids' school." In each, the CCC host provides a link to the school divisions library catalogue, a link to the names and contact information for the school trustees and proceeds, after cautioning the listener to make sure no one under 18 in the room, to read what she considers scurrilous passages from selected books in the school division's libraries, such as Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye,* and from young adult graphic novels such as Margaret Atwood, *The Hand Maid's Tale-Graphic Novel*.[17]

- **Parents for Choice in Education**, an Alberta-based non-sectarian organization, has strongly supported the Minister's book banning order. PCE's Executive Director, John Hilton-O'Brien, sums up their view, "Removing materials from minors' access isn't about freedom of expression, but ensures schools are presenting the best possible resources for students to learn from."[18]

- **Parents As First Educators** are working to rid schools of curriculum and books that deal with sex education, systemic racism, and gender identity.[19]

- **Parents Voice BC** is taking a different approach. It describes itself as a registered "centre-right political party" that aims to take control of all school boards in British Columbia. It claims to have registered in all 60 school districts for the October 2026 election with a goal of winning "a Double-Double majority: the majority of Trustees on a majority of the province's school boards," setting the stage for "electing Trustee majorities on all school boards in the province in 2030." The group's slogan is "Education, not Indoctrination" and supports the elimination of the same sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) materials in schools, as does Action4Canada. Mark Walla, Parents Voice BC founder and president, sums up their view, "I think a lot of people feel like all the social justice-related stuff in schools has gone too far. Are we doing that at a detriment to all the regular, kind of, what I think of as the basics of education?"[20]

- **Regroupement des Parents Vigilants du Québec** focuses much of its attention on "the Quebec Culture and Citizenship (CCQ) program imposed in all primary and secondary schools by the Quebec Ministry of Education" and demanding a complete moratorium on sex education in Quebec schools.[21]

The number of parental rights groups (religious and secular) in Canada is growing, as is their zeal. They are putting active pressure on other provinces to act as Alberta has. Any success they achieve only inspires them to broaden their demands for what is to be removed.

Targeting books on sex education, family diversity, as well as young adult graphic novels is part of the disturbing pattern revealed in the Centre for Free Expression's annual report of challenges Canadian libraries faced in 2025.[22] Public, school, and academic libraries in Canada received 460 challenges in 2025, of which 359 were for young adult books. Of those, 320 (89%) were the result of the Alberta Minister's Order, and all of those 320 books were removed.

Further, every one of the ten most challenged items in Canadian libraries in 2025 was a young

adult graphic novel or graphic novel series. Here is the top ten list:

1. Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman* (series)
2. Robert Kirkman, *The Walking Dead* (series)
3. Brian K. Vaughan, *The Last Man* (series)
4. (tied) Kanoko Sakurakoji, *Blackbird* (series)
4. Brian K. Vaughan, *Saga* (series)
6. (tied) Craig Thompson, *Blankets*
6. Alan Moore, *The Watchman* (Series)
8. (tied) Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale — Graphic Novel*
8. Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*
8. Matyas Namai / George Orwell, *1984: The Graphic Novel*[23]

Demands by special interest groups for removal of books are assertions that because they do not like something, no one else should have a right to see, read, or hear it. This runs contrary to Canadians' *Charter* right to freedom of expression which includes the right not only to express yourself but the right to seek and receive information. It also violates the fundamental value of libraries world-wide — intellectual freedom; namely, as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions put it, "Libraries shall ensure that the selection and availability of library materials and services is governed by professional considerations and not by political, moral and religious views."[24]

For school libraries, judgments about what is appropriate are best made by professional educators and librarians, not by politicians playing to their political base. To the detriment of youth in Alberta, their provincial government has decided otherwise. There is growing pressure elsewhere for governments, school boards, and library boards to do likewise — pressure that must be vigorously resisted. /OS

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Notes

1. https://action4canada.com/massive-win-in-alberta-against-pornographic-books-in-schools/

2. https://livewirecalgary.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025_030_Education_and_Childcare.pdf

3. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-school-books-removal-1.7620807

4. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alta-library-books-1.7622459

5. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdx0x6zz2pro; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/02/margaret-atwood-alberta-canada-book-ban; https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/margaret-atwood-alberta-school-book-ban-1236360116/; https://www.euronews.com/culture/2025/09/02/public-book-burnings-margaret-atwood-comments-on-the-handmaids-tale-alberta-book-ban; https://www.rnz.co.nz/life/books/the-handmaid-s-tale-author-responds-to-alberta-book-ban-with-satirical-short-story

6. https://www.castanet.net/news/Alberta/569965/Alberta-government-pauses-ban-on-school-library-books-with-sex-content

7. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-school-library-book-ban-paused-1.7623252

8. https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/Documents/MinOrders/2025/Education_and_Childcare/2025_034_Education_and_Childcare.pdf

9. https://cfe.torontomu.ca/blog/2026/03/unsafe-library

10. CFE Profile of *Blankets* https://cfe.torontomu.ca/book/blankets

11. CFE Profile of *Fun Home:* https://cfe.torontomu.ca/book/fun-home-family-tragicomic

12. CFE Profile of *Flamer:* https://cfe.torontomu.ca/book/flamer

13. https://action4canada.com/massive-win-in-alberta-against-pornographic-books-in-schools/

14. https://action4canada.com/wp-content/uploads/List-of-SOGI-Inclusive-Books-for-K-12-Schools.pdf

15. This is laid out in Action4Canada's "Notice of Liability", a bogus legal document they encourage supporters to send to public library staff and to school board officials and school library staff. https://action4canada.com/wp-content/uploads/liability-notice-pornographic-books-sogi-resources.pdf

16. https://www.instagram.com/concerned_citizens_canada/

17. https://www.instagram.com/concerned_citizens_canada/

18. https://www.parentchoice.ca/

19. https://www.pafe.ca/

20. https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/parental-rights-movement-us-canada-1.6796070

21. https://www.rpvquebec.org/

22. https://cfe.torontomu.ca/publications/rising-demands-censorship-challenges-faced-canadian-libraries-2025

23. Ibid.

24. https://repository.ifla.org/rest/api/core/bitstreams/e2e51673-8803-4f34-bfe8-2f6eba849dfc/content

Simon Enoch

See no evil, hear no evil

Anti-trans apologetics under Bill 137 in Saskatchewan

When the Saskatchewan government announced their intention in August of 2023 to move forward with Bill 137—a so-called "Parent's bill of rights"—that required parental consent for school staff to recognize a pupil's new gender-related preferred name or gender identity, as well as any sexual health educational content, opposition was both quick and fierce.

There was universal condemnation of the legislation from LGBTQ+ advocates as well as from an impressive array of allies, including the Saskatchewan labour movement and from human and civil rights organizations across the province and around the country. Saskatchewan's child and youth advocate Lisa Broda warned that the legislation "likely violates children's constitutional rights," while Saskatchewan human rights commissioner Heather Kuttia resigned in opposition to the legislation, calling it "an attack on the rights of Trans, nonbinary, and gender diverse children." Students at multiple high schools in Regina and Saskatoon led walkouts in protest and members of the government were banned from participating in official LGBTQ+ Pride activities for as long as the legislation sits on the books.

Despite this concerted opposition and the overwhelming evidence that this legislation would cause significant harm and risk to LGBTQ+ students, Scott Moe's government showed no hesitancy in using its full weight to pass the Bill. The government would recall the legislature on October 10th for an emergency session solely to invoke the notwithstanding clause to override

a Saskatchewan court decision that the law violated the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

But while court challenges still persist, much of the public fervour against Bill 137 has died down. Part of this is outright fear. As Saskatchewan Teacher Federation president Samantah Becotte observes, the law puts teachers in a terrible bind: "do they obey the law, thereby potentially placing a child in an extremely dangerous position, or ignore it and leave themselves open to legal jeopardy?"

Another reason is that, to "solve" the problem," the implications of the law are sometimes dismissed. Given how few LGBTQ+ students there are in Saskatchewan schools, so the argument goes, such legislation will have little if any impact and therefore does not need to be actively resisted.

But perhaps the most important element of why open resistance seems to have subsided is the almost liminal way the law exists in practice—which to some extent satisfies certain supporters and opponents of the bill alike. While putatively on the books, there has been no official sanction or punishment against a school staff member for violating it. Moreover, we don't even know what such penalties would entail because the government has not made it known. And whether the act *is* ever enforced seems arbitrary—dependent on the discretion of school administrators which means the bill's impact can vary widely subject to an administration's approval, fear or misunderstanding of the legislation. This leaves students to try and navigate whom (if anyone) within the school they can trust. For some opponents, the fact that the law does not appear to be openly punishing anyone allows for them to tolerate its existence.

It is this kind of stasis that has allowed the law to be grudgingly tolerated that moved teachers Alex Schmidt and Nick Day to found the Saskatchewan Coalition to Repeal Bill 137, a grassroots organization of teachers and community members working to repeal Bill 137 and urging unions and school administrations to take a stand against the law.

Both have heard a litany of excuses as to why the law should not be openly challenged. Day provides a short-list:

> I've heard from trustees it only affects a small number because there aren't many Trans people and most have supportive parents. I've heard the legislation is not being followed on the ground so it's not really having harm... I've heard, of course, that there's no harm because there's a clause allowing the school counsellor to keep the child's privacy if the counsellor believes the student might face harm. What people don't realize is that a) the harm is the heteronormative climate created by the bill and 2) the counsellor has to "work with the student to make a plan to inform parents" or some variant of that. The message that 'Trans is wrong' is still coming through loud and clear.

Day believes that people are willing to believe such arguments because the alternative might force people to make difficult decisions,

"Instead, people are willing to believe—or pretend they believe—an endless cavalcade of razor thin arguments in order to avoid inconveniencing themselves, coming into conflict at work, and being accountable to the universal human rights not being enjoyed by Trans youth."

Part of the Coalition's mission is to demonstrate that regardless of the law's enforcement or lack thereof, its mere existence as provincial policy is profoundly damaging to Trans and non-binary students. While others might be able to turn their heads, Day and Schmidt see what Bill 137 has actually wrought within the schools they work at; a toxic mixture of confusion, fear and capitulation.

Day explains how once Bill 137 was made law, Queer students expressed profound confusion over what was and wasn't allowed in school. Day summarizes what students were saying to him:

> Since the pronoun policy, I don't know what's allowed anymore... What I'm really feeling here is, I don't know what the fuck's allowed. I'm not allowed, none of it's allowed. Queer shit isn't allowed. So I'm just kind of going to go dark.

The implications of the law are sometimes dismissed. Given how few LGBTQ+ students there are in Saskatchewan schools, so the argument goes, such legislation will have little if any impact and therefore does not need to be actively resisted.

While open, direct confrontation between students and the law has not been commonplace, the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ students' "going dark" is. Day describes this as students "going back in the closet," not attending school, or teachers' forgoing introducing Queer content for fear of backlash.

For example, Bill 137's provision that parents must be informed and consent prior to any lessons with sexual health content may prevent teachers from adopting lesson plans that could potentially court controversy. Schmidt observes that teaching sex education was already challenging in Saskatchewan, but Bill 137 makes it even more undesirable for teachers; "Teachers don't want to teach it because [the environment] is just too combative."

This chilling effect on both students and school staff is the real impact of Bill 137, regardless of its enforcement, and this chilling effect extends far beyond just what is specifically targeted in the Bill.

Despite not being targeted in the legislation, both Day and Schmidt note that since implementation, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) have come under greater scrutiny by certain school administrations. Since 137 became law, Schmidt explains how GSAs have to navigate a new set of "hoops and rules" that other school clubs do not seem subject to. Schmidt recounts how GSAs are now required to validate their existence by demonstrating connections to the curriculum though formal lesson plans that are not expected of other extracurricular clubs. "If this club has to demonstrate its legitimacy and all other clubs don't," Schmidt argues, "what you're clearly saying is it's not legitimate, right?" For Schmidt, GSAs, like other extracurricular clubs, are for building a community for students "to have a place to be." While connections to the curriculum might be a valuable adjunct, it should not be the primary focus of extracurricular clubs, and it certainly shouldn't be a reason for disallowing these vitally important spaces for LGBTQ+ students. Schmidt fears that the extra scrutiny and work required to run GSA's under the current conditions may ultimately dissuade teachers and students from participating.

That this legislation would have a chilling effect on students and staff shouldn't be any surprise. We know from the experience of the United States that anti-Trans laws and policies irrespective of what they target have had the overall effect of erasing the reality of Trans people's experience and fostering a dangerously hostile climate. The logic of erasure is to render Trans students, parents and educators effectively invisible by removing them from lessons, books, language and spaces. "Over time, writes Ezra Kidowski, "those absences become evidence. They're used to justify neglect, to minimize harm, and to explain away patterns of violence as isolated or rare."

Unfortunately it is difficult to document the more insidious impacts this legislation is having behind-the-scenes. Schmidt and Day find this the more frustrating aspect of their activism—constantly having to convince figures in positions of power and authority that, because it is not being enforced, the legislation is benign. "It should have been obvious from day one that a toxic policy environment will create these effects, right?" Day laments, "So, if we have to convince you of that, that's really challenging." Both feel that the authority figures they confront are more concerned with documenting individual incidents of harm rather than understanding the pervasive effects this legislation is having throughout the province. "There's a lot of kids, there's a lot of teachers that are at risk, and we're not hearing about it all," explains Schmidt. "We have not scratched the surface of the way that this has impacted people because the risk in talking about the impacts is too great. It is not safe for students, it is not safe for teachers because of this bill."

But while both remain frustrated by the myopic way the Bill is viewed by so many in the province, they also understand the stakes of continuing to tolerate its existence. For Day this is a simple question, "Do we acknowledge in our public institutions that Transgender people exist irrevocably and therefore bear rights that are inviolable? And do we exist in a culture where universal access to public education is a guarantee?" /OS

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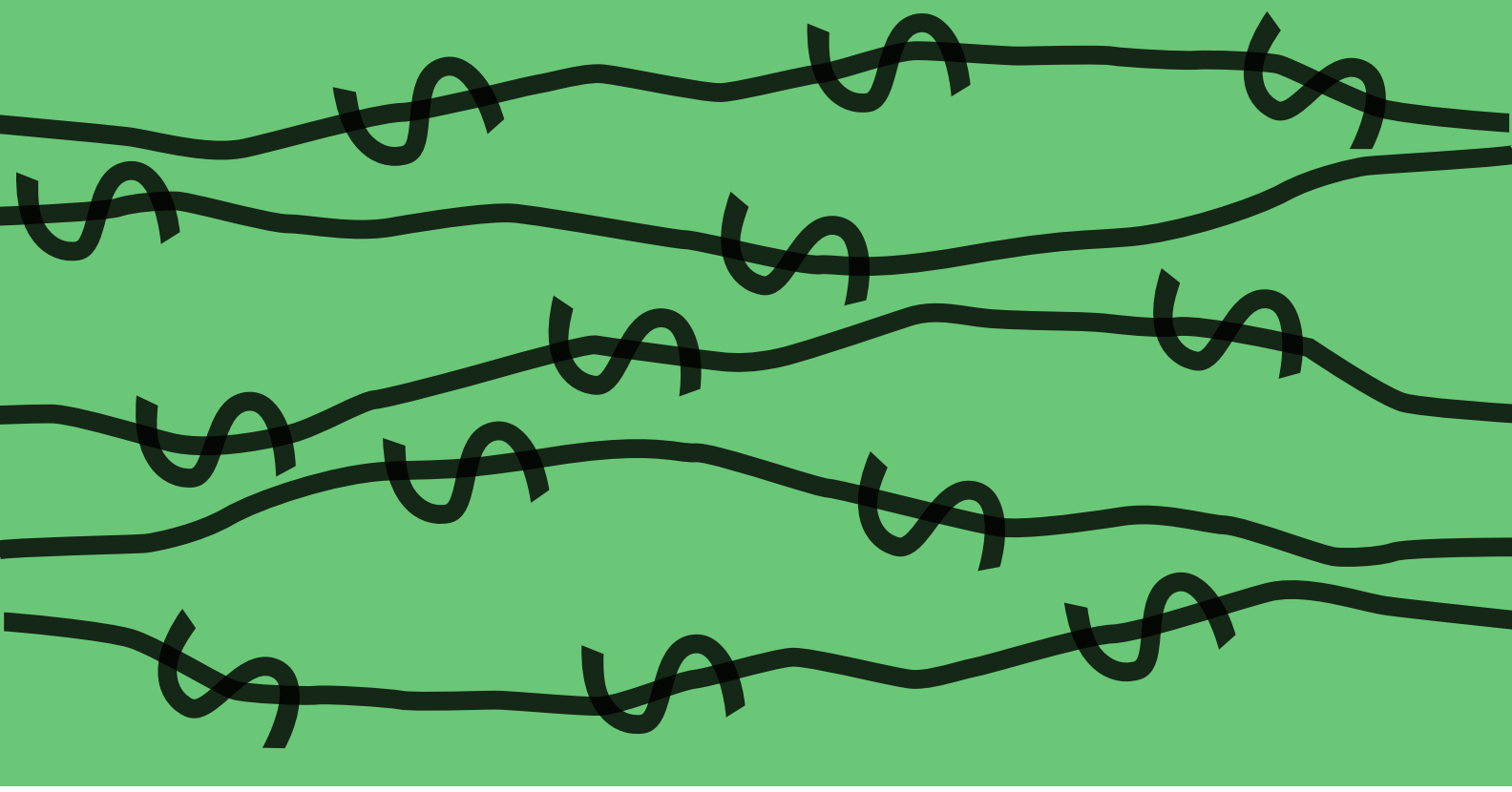

Sara Wilson

Budget as border

How public systems quietly decide who gets left out

The child stopped going to school sometime in the winter.

There was no meeting where anyone decided he could not return. No letter withdrawing his place. The process unfolded quietly, the way absences sometimes accumulate when something has already begun to break. The classroom had always been loud. Thirty children speaking at once. Chairs scraping against the floor. The low electrical hum of fluorescent lights overhead. For most students the noise blurred into the background, part of the ordinary atmosphere of school. For him it arrived all at once, every sound demanding attention.

At first the teachers tried small adjustments. A desk moved closer to the wall. Short breaks in the hallway when the room became too overwhelming. Instructions repeated slowly while the other children began their work. The teachers cared about the boy and wanted him to stay. But classrooms run on momentum. Lessons move forward whether every student can follow them or not. Without additional support, the structure could only bend so far.

His parents asked the school for help. The specialized program for students with complex needs had already reached capacity. Educational assistants were assigned to other classrooms earlier in the year. The waiting list for formal assessments stretched months, sometimes years. The administrators explained the situation in careful language. They did not question that the child needed support. The difficulty was that the system had no place to put him.

For a while the family tried shorter school days. Then mornings only. Eventually the boy began staying home entirely on the days when the noise felt unbearable. Officially he remained enrolled.

In practice he disappeared from the classroom almost without anyone noticing.

By the time a system fails someone, the decision has already been made. It was made when the budget determined how much care, space, and attention the system could afford to give.

Later the explanation arrived in language that sounded administrative rather than tragic. During the previous budget cycle, the district had reduced specialized support positions. Fewer staff meant fewer placements. The waiting list grew quietly. So did the number of children learning that the school system had not been built for them.

Stories like this rarely appear in policy debates. Education discussions tend to revolve around curriculum reforms, test scores, or teacher shortages. When funding enters the conversation, it is usually framed in the language of efficiency and fiscal responsibility. Yet behind every classroom lies a quieter set of decisions. Decisions about how many staff can be hired, how many programs can exist, and how many students a system has been funded to support.

Budgets are usually presented as technical documents. They appear to be neutral tools for managing limited resources. School boards debate them in long evening meetings filled with spreadsheets and forecasts. Administrators describe them as responsible planning. Yet those numbers quietly determine the limits of what institutions can do. A mission statement describes what a system hopes to achieve. A budget reveals what it has decided it can afford.

The consequences of those decisions rarely appear immediately. They surface later in the ordinary moments of institutional life. A waiting list that grows longer each year. A classroom that cannot stretch far enough to include another student. A child who stops coming to school and becomes one more absence in the record.

Budgets determine the limits of what institutions can do. A mission statement describes what a system hopes to achieve. A budget reveals what it has decided it can afford.

The architecture of these decisions has a history. For much of the twentieth century, governments funded institutions through stable operating grants that allowed them to respond flexibly to community needs. Beginning in the 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s, that model was dismantled across North America. Competitive, project-based grants replaced core funding. Organizations were required to demonstrate measurable outcomes within fixed timelines.

In practice, the shift quietly reshaped what schools could do and who they could serve. Programs that produced countable results flourished. Work that required long-term relationship building, open-ended support, or sustained attention to students whose needs resisted tidy metrics became harder to fund and harder to justify. In British Columbia, that transition is visible in school district special education budgets, in educational assistant staffing ratios, in the length of assessment waitlists. The money follows the measurable. The students who fall outside the measurable fall outside the system.

Scholars who study public institutions have long observed that organizations shape their services around the financial structures that sustain them. Economists call this resource dependence: institutions that rely on external funding adapt their activities to match the priorities of those who control the resources they need to survive. In schools, this looks like special education programs that expand where targeted grants exist and contract where they don't, regardless of whether the student population has changed. It looks like district administrators who genuinely want to serve every child designing programs around the students their budget was built to support.

Researchers studying education systems describe a related consequence as mission drift. Schools and districts founded with broad commitments to inclusion gradually narrow their focus as they align their work with available funding. The shift rarely reflects a change in values. It reflects the reality that even the most committed institutions must operate within financial systems that determine which forms of need are considered fundable.

Political scientists describe a third dynamic through the concept of policy feedback. Once

a funding structure is established, it begins to shape the institutions built around it. Assessment tools develop around the categories that funding systems recognize. Evidence of success emerges from those programs. Future funding flows toward the initiatives that already exist. Over time the system reinforces itself. Students whose needs fit the recognized categories remain visible. Those who don't gradually disappear from institutional attention.

The consequences extend across generations. Sociologists describe this as cumulative disadvantage. Small budget decisions that appear practical in the moment accumulate into long-term inequality. Schools develop expertise around the students they already know how to serve. Infrastructure evolves to support existing programs. Decades later the system is highly effective for some students and nearly inaccessible for others. Not because anyone chose that outcome. Because the budget did.

This pattern is rarely described as injustice. It appears instead as limitation. Officials speak about fiscal constraints, capacity limits, and sustainability. The language suggests that the boundaries of public education are natural consequences of scarce resources. They are not. They are the result of decisions about how resources will be allocated and which priorities will receive protection in a budget.

Why this persists

If the consequences are so visible, the question becomes unavoidable. Why do systems continue to reproduce these exclusions year after year?

Part of the answer lies in the quiet incentives embedded within fiscal structures themselves.

Officials speak about fiscal constraints, capacity limits, and sustainability, suggesting that the boundaries of public education are natural consequences of scarce resources. They are not.

Programs designed for students whose needs fit existing funding categories tend to produce measurable outcomes. They generate statistics that can be reported to school boards, ministries, and the public. A workshop delivered, a case resolved, a student who graduated. These outcomes allow institutions to demonstrate success. Serving students with more complex needs often produces fewer visible results, requires more time, and introduces uncertainty into systems evaluated through efficiency.

Political leaders benefit from these arrangements as well. Budget decisions framed around fiscal responsibility are easier to defend than those framed around expanding services indefinitely. A balanced budget, a funded program, rising graduation rates as evidence of good governance. The students who remain outside those systems rarely appear in official metrics.

Even families who benefit from public education often benefit from these arrangements without realizing it. Schools function well for students who fit the classroom structure. Parents whose children receive services quickly and reliably tend to perceive the system as working. The concentration of resources around students already well served reinforces the perception that the system is functioning effectively. This is not cynicism. It is the ordinary operation of a system that has structured itself around the students it can most easily count.

For this reason, calls for increased funding, while important, rarely resolve the underlying problem. New funding almost always flows through the same fiscal frameworks that already exist. Programs continue to be evaluated through the same metrics that defined earlier budgets. Additional resources often strengthen the parts of the system that already function while leaving structural exclusions intact.

The pandemic offered a striking illustration. Emergency funding expanded education supports at unprecedented speed. Yet most of that support flowed through institutions and service networks that already existed. Students already connected to disability services, learning support programs, or resourced schools received help quickly. Those who were outside those systems often struggled to access anything at all. The expansion of funding increased the scale of the system without changing its architecture.

The obstacle is rarely the absence of money alone. It is the architecture through which money moves. Systems built around efficiency, predictability, and measurable outcomes struggle

to accommodate forms of need that fall outside those categories. Accountability frameworks count how many students have been served. They rarely ask how many remain excluded.

What structural change looks like

If the problem lies in the architecture of fiscal systems, meaningful reform cannot rely on funding increases alone. It requires reconsidering how education budgets are designed.

One approach involves participatory budgeting. Instead of allowing financial priorities to be determined exclusively by administrators or ministries, communities most affected by school systems are invited to help decide how resources are allocated. Several school districts and municipalities have experimented with this model, shifting focus away from abstract efficiency toward the lived realities of those who depend on the system. When families who have experienced exclusion sit at the table where budgets are built, the categories that get funded tend to change.

Another possibility involves reversing the metrics through which institutional success is measured. Most schools evaluate their performance by counting the students they serve. This obscures an important question. Who remains outside the system entirely? Measuring exclusion rather than participation would force districts to confront the students their programs fail to reach.

Structural change also requires applying principles of universal design from the beginning rather than treating complexity as an afterthought. Many schools attempt to expand accessibility only after systems are in place. Additional supports are layered onto structures that were designed for a narrow set of learners. Building systems that assume diversity from the outset would shift budgeting priorities. Complexity would be treated as a foundational condition rather than an optional add-on.

Funding models themselves may require reconsideration. Grant frameworks that define narrow categories of eligible students often determine which children districts can serve. Flexible, unrestricted funding allows institutions to respond to emerging needs rather than fitting their work into predefined program structures. Some provincial funding models have begun moving in this direction, though the distance remaining is significant.

The most consequential shift may involve rethinking where education budgets begin. Most systems are designed around the students easiest to serve. Programs expand outward from that foundation, adding specialized supports as resources allow. A different approach would reverse that logic. Start with the students whose needs are most complex. Build the system around them. It would almost certainly work for everyone else as well.

Such changes require reimagining how institutions understand efficiency, accountability, and fairness. They also require acknowledging something school systems rarely state directly. Budgets do not simply distribute resources. They draw the borders of belonging within the institutions they sustain.

By the end of the school year, the classroom had rearranged itself. Projects covered the walls. Desks shifted as groups changed. The quiet choreography of a busy classroom continued as it always had.

The empty desk near the back of the room remained unused for a while.

Eventually it disappeared.

So will others. Not because school systems fail dramatically, but because they succeed at exactly what they were built to do: serve the students they were funded to serve and quietly exclude everyone else.

Until we recognize education budgets as moral documents, as maps of who we have decided matters, we will keep building schools that claim universality while budgeting for exclusion. The child who stopped going to school did not fall through the cracks. He encountered the border the budget drew. And unless we are willing to redraw that border, to restructure fiscal frameworks around the students currently outside them, we are not building public education. We are administering inequality with spreadsheets. /OS

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Robin Whitaker

The hollowing out of public postsecondary education

What do we have to lose?

I am a professor of basketweaving. Not actually. I'm an anthropologist. But I feel sure my field is the kind Ontario Premier Doug Ford had in mind when he advised students not to choose "basket-weaving courses" because "there's not too many baskets being sold out there."

Ford was putting his mouth where the money now is. He was responding to student alarm that, at the same time as Ontario is lifting a seven year freeze on domestic tuition, student aid in Ontario is to be radically rebalanced. Previously, a qualifying Ontario student might get up to 85% of their aid in the form of a grant. That proportion has been reduced to 25%, with the rest coming as a loan.

Premier Ford's logic is clear. The prospect of significant debt on graduation should encourage incoming students to look at labour market demands—or whatever they calculate these will be several years hence—and select their programs accordingly. Only those able to fund their studies independently should be allowed to choose based on such feckless motives as intellectual or craft affinity. Cementing the view that the postsecondary system should be directed to short term market principles, the new student aid framework revealed on February 12th came with an announcement that Ontario will add $6.4 billion and 70,000 new seats in

"programs that align with student and labour-market demand."

Ontario's public postsecondary education (PSE) system needs additional money, no question. As with PSE institutions right across Canada, Ontario's public universities and colleges had been using income from international student tuition to offset chronic public underfunding to an extent that became devastatingly clear when that revenue stream was abruptly and significantly reduced by new federal caps on international student visas starting in 2024.

Thousands of jobs have been lost, and scores of programs suspended or cancelled. The Ontario Public Sector Employees Union, OPSEU, reported 10,000 layoffs and 600 program closures in public colleges in 2025. But Ontario is hardly alone. In British Columbia the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators registered hundreds of lost jobs. Saskatchewan Polytechnic has cut 120 positions. The Manitoba government recently announced it will close the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology, while the Nova Scotia Community College expects layoffs of 3% of staff in light of provisions in that province's 2026 budget.

If the college sector was hit hard and early, public universities have not been spared retrenchment. York University made headlines last year when it announced the suspension of enrolment in 18 programs, most of them in the liberal arts. But others have followed, including the University of Calgary, the University of Winnipeg, and Memorial University of Newfoundland. Hiring freezes are now widespread. As always, precariously employed academics are especially vulnerable. Even academic staff who have been rehired repeatedly on an annual basis may find that management has opted to "let contracts come to an end and not renew them… Not to fire people but to allow their contracts to play out." This too, fits a market model where risk is externalised to workers, who can be readily shed as conditions change.

Privatization and marketization

Ontario's move to reduce grants in favour of interest-bearing loans raises the question of how much new public funding is really being added to its system. Here, too, we see a wider trend. As Canadian Association of University Teachers Executive Director David Robinson observed, operating funding at Canadian universities comes from two main sources: provincial grants and student tuition. Historically, government transfers made up the lion's share of funds for the core academic mission. In the last decade, he noted, the balance of funding has shifted such that "total university income from direct government sources was lower than income from tuition fees and nongovernment revenue sources." If a share of tuition income comes indirectly from government in the form of grants to students, the trend remains clear.

At the same time, even as provincial governments move away from direct support for public postsecondary, they are increasingly ready to intervene more-or-less directly in institutional missions. Increased dependence on tuition and other forms of private funding is one widespread mechanism to encourage reorientation to market principles. These can be reinforced by tying funding to various government-set "performance indicators" or through conditional funding.

Thus Nova Scotia's Bill 12, An Act Respecting Advanced Education, empowers government to withhold funding from universities that do not align with the social and economic priorities of the government of the day. Passed in 2025, in the words of the Association of Nova Scotia University Teachers, this legislation gives the provincial government "unprecedented authority over university governance, research priorities, and institutional decision-making." Alberta showed similar ambitions with Bill 18, its Provincial Priorities Act, which had originally proposed to empower government vetting of federal research grants to university researchers for alignment with provincial government priorities. Thanks to hard political work by Alberta's academic staff unions, the most concerning provisions for university researchers were removed from the legislation as ultimately adopted. But academic staff in the province remain concerned about the Alberta government's apparent interest in the handling of academic freedom, and its focus on narrow labour market outcomes.

Federally, the Canadian government largely maintained existing commitments to research funding in its 2025 budget, a broad positive in an era of cuts. But new funding was targeted to industry, and Canada earmarked $1.7 billion for international research talent attraction. As I will discuss below, in the absence of an accompanying plan to stabilize the system, the latter program may exacerbate current inequities.

What do we stand to lose?

In short, Canada's system of public postsecondary education is being hollowed out

through chronic underfunding combined with a marketized orientation that values postsecondary education primarily as a pipeline to train students for specific jobs: a service to be delivered according to a mandate of efficiency and accountability to short-term goals.

What do we stand to lose? Even in less extreme situations, layoffs and hiring freezes mean academic staff face intensified workloads, continually being asked to do more with less. But doing more with less always means doing less with less too: fewer and bigger classes mean less time for research, but also less contact time with students and lost chances to nurture and inspire. The consequences of this thinning out of the educational experience will be counted not only in the loss of fulfilling student-teacher relationships, but also in terms that should recognizable even to the most market-driven of premiers, as potential in need of encouragement—maybe even the potential to create a tech giant—is left fallow.

But when institutions lose programs or close campuses, it can leave entire regions and communities with no access to whole fields of study. We saw this scenario play out in an extreme form with the restructuring of Laurentian University a few years ago.

On Premier Ford's logic, that's no big loss if the affected programs fall into his basketweaving category, since students wouldn't likely get a job in philosophy, anthropology, or gender studies on graduation anyway. But these programs offer something different. In conventional labour market terms, they offer enduring capacities that are only going to become more important and that enable people to work well in a wide range of areas.

They also offer the capacity to see the world in a different way. This can matter in unexpected ways. *Financial Times* editor, Gillian Tett, who wrote a PhD thesis on Muslim marriage practices in Soviet Tajikistan, was among the first to predict the 2008 global financial crisis. She credits her training in anthropology with its holistic and relational orientation for her distinctive approach to economic and financial analysis. As federal health minister in 2020, Patty Hajdu said her BA in anthropology from Lakehead University helped her navigate the challenges of the early pandemic, which required rapid social recalibration and affected every aspect of human interaction. Would Hajdu, returning to university as a single parent living in Thunder Bay, have found her way to her academic passion for anthropology if it was not available at her local campus?

It is not only individual students who lose if such "basketweaving" programs become available only to those with the mobility and financial wherewithal to access a handful of surviving programs. Fields that offer critical perspectives on the world we have, indeed, that let us see that this world could be otherwise, are vital both to democratic health and livable futures.

Historically, a distinguishing strength of Canada's postsecondary system has been a broad equality of educational opportunity in the sense that wherever in the country you studied, you could rely on getting a widely-recognized high quality education. Underfunding combined with privatization and marketization threaten that in the ways discussed above. Under current circumstances, the federal focus on attracting international talent asks us to welcome new colleagues into a system under severe strain. It also risks new kinds of inequities and divisions, as opportunities go disproportionately to a handful of research-intensive institutions and units, while the rest fight for crumbs.

What's needed now is a coherent national strategy to stabilize our system, encompassing a commitment to retain and nurture Canadian talent *and* to welcome international students and scholars for sound educational reasons, not as a compensatory revenue stream. Canadians are rightly proud of our public K-12 system, funded by taxpayers and free at the point of delivery. And while we are not there yet, the multilateral framework that brought a new focus on building out accessible quality Early Childhood Education across Canada is a welcome move in the right direction. It is now time for a federal-provincial strategy on public postsecondary education: essential infrastructure in this nation-building era. /OS

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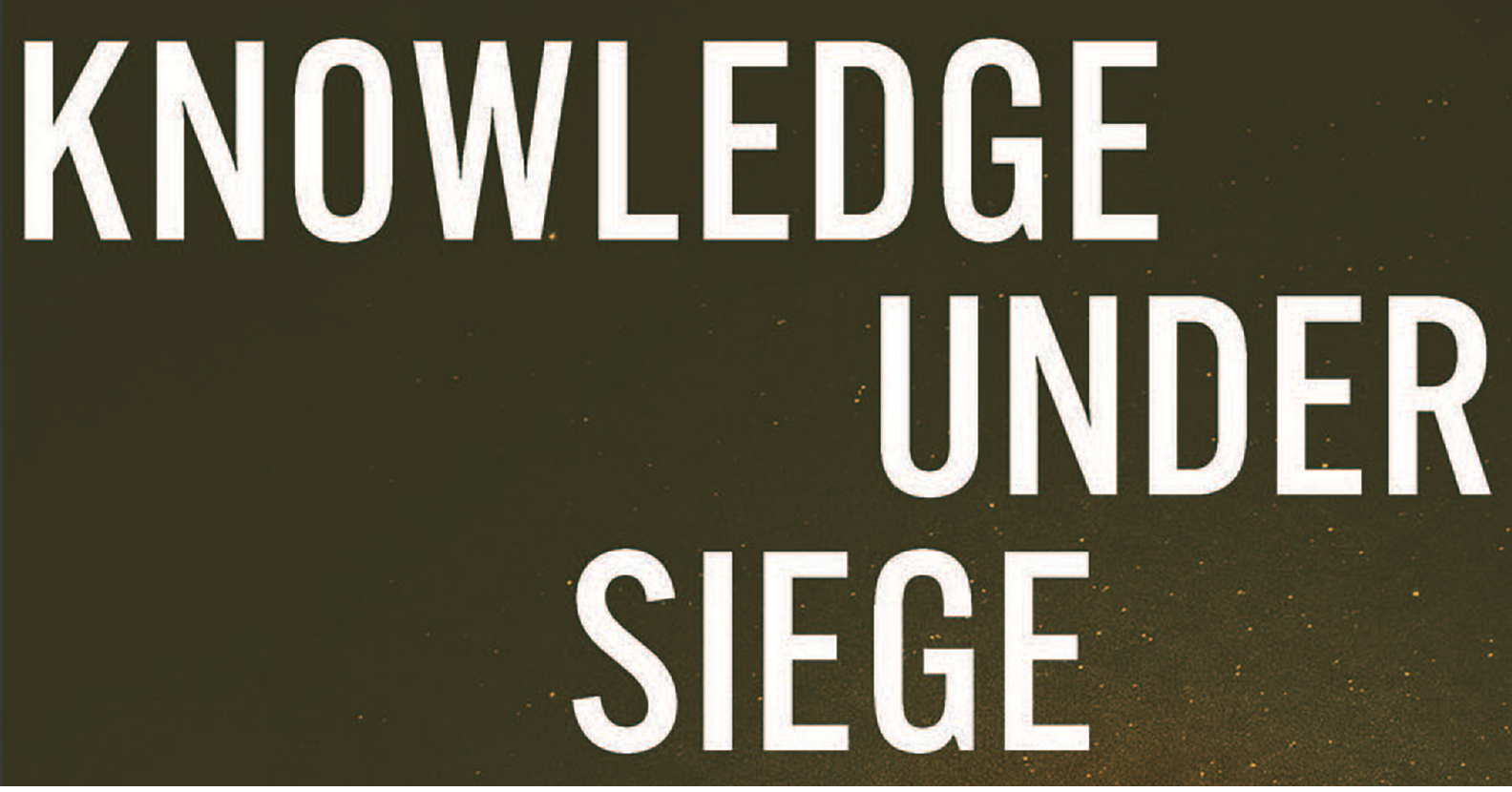

Edited by Marc Spooner and James Mcninch

Knowledge under siege: Charting a future for universities

An excerpt

The role of universities has been under greater scrutiny, from within the institutions themselves but to an even greater degree from those who live, work, and think outside its borders. This exterior agitation poses the same question—"what are universities for?"—but it does not start with the assumption that a university is an institution whose purpose is to seek (research) and disseminate (teach) the truth (in all its contested meanings).

Those working inside the university understand its fundamental values: freedom of inquiry and expression, academic freedom and intellectual integrity, and the equality and dignity of all people (Turpin & Bailey, 2024). How those values play out in the everyday is constantly being tested.

The university's biggest threats are not only occurring in fascist and authoritarian countries, but also in traditionally regarded liberal democracies where these attacks follow a similar playbook:

> Undermine public trust in institutions that question power, and reward those that remain loyal. The goal is not just to control universities, but to reshape the civic imagination—to erode the idea that higher education should nurture questioning, complexity, and dissent. (Spooner & Westheimer, 2025)

This is most evident in the United States in the current administration of Donald J. Trump's targeted assaults on "the law, higher education, medical research, ethical standards, America's foreign alliances, free speech, the civil service, religion, the media and much more" (Edsall, 2025)—all of which parallel a well-worn trajectory to fascism.

The contributors to this book trouble both the internal and external assumptions about what universities have been in the past, what they are like currently, and what they might, could, or should be in the future. Universities have adapted, and continue to adapt, in response to the demands, constraints, and needs placed upon them by the governments, societies, and communities in which they reside and indeed serve.

One argument we wish to make explicit here is that universities operating in a liberal democracy have a special role to play, one that sets them apart from universities in totalitarian regimes and authoritarian and illiberal states.

In addition to seeking truth, making discoveries, and passing on knowledge and wisdom, the university in a democracy has as its unique purpose that of asking difficult questions of governments, of other power structures, and of society itself. Its role includes ensuring that public policy is informed by the best available evidence as well as helping to foster critical and creative citizens whose formation prepares them for a lifetime of meaningful employment, community engagement, and democratic participation. When a society and a university are operating in an optimal fashion, these processes are occurring both inside and outside of campus. The university is in the service of our current society but also, more importantly, to the aspirational one on the horizon.

It is imperative to acknowledge the moment we are in as well as the trajectories of our near past that affect and inform our present and future.

Among a variety of developments of concern, our current moment features the outright banning of entire areas of study, the abolishment of tenure, and the curtailment of academic freedom, as well as a near ubiquitous push toward performance-based funding (Spooner, 2024). It also features chronic underfunding, international student quotas, and anti-woke sentiment with pushback against equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives meant to permit greater participation in increasingly conservative and authoritarian interventionist states.

Still other developments include the widespread use and advancement of artificial intelligence and the uncertain ground upon which universities have based their diverse responses to it. It is a time of audit culture, anti-intellectualism, and disinformation (Spooner 2018, 2024).

It can be stated with little hyperbole that from our fields of study to our campus greens, academies and academics are under attack, just as our global democracies equally find themselves so challenged.

As Mark Kingwell elaborates, "Education is always political, and too often in the service of dominant ideas, not novel ones.... Intellectual inquiry should not offer comfort or affirmation of what we already believe" (Kingwell, 2024).

There is no question that universities have had, and do have, a wide variety of purposes and serve many constituencies, some discrete and diverse and some closely overlapping and entwined. We have seen, particularly in the United States (but also in Canada and the United Kingdom), how national and local legislators can deny or even erase academic freedom and intervene in the business of university governance. We have witnessed the influence of partisan funding of right-wing attacks on higher education.

As governments' share of university funding has declined, academia has depended more and more on benefactors and donors to fund not just scholarships and bursaries, but to help with operations just to keep the lights on, as the saying goes. The volatility of student enrolments and the dependency of universities on tuition dollars, particularly from international students, have led to difficult decisions being taken on many campuses that have impacted program restructuring, amalgamations, and unit closures.

Universities have a wide variety of purposes and serve many constituencies. We have seen how national and local legislators can deny or erase academic freedom and intervene in the business of university governance.

An emphasis on the need to compete for students coincides with an increasing emphasis on post-secondary institutions preparing students for the job market and, increasingly, being in direct training partnerships with business and industry.

That being said, universities have also learned to reach out and respond to community needs with new programs. In this we see how the values of universities are embodied and reflected in their actions and activities.

This culture of encouragement is also a truth of what universities hope for and aspire toward, all while recognizing the dangers of tokenism and superficial change. Such programs and celebrations illustrate a new role for universities: their desire to respond to societal needs and to build knowledge through action. In so doing they may offer us another truth: our need more than ever for a sense of hope.

In its aspirational ideal, the university is a place of hope and of our collective futurity. In deliberative truth seeking, there is hope. Every society and each generation of scholars must revisit the fundamental question "What are universities for?" and defend its ideals such as they are and are always becoming.

Against this backdrop, we ask, what kind of society do we want universities to serve and to aspire to become?

Gathered in this volume are diverse and thoughtful voices from institutions of higher education. These voices insist that strong counter narratives exist to oppose the dangerous state of affairs facing liberal democracy and human rights. There are vital and useful alternatives with which to chart a course away from these dangerous elements of fascism in the world today. And so, we must say that this unwelcome truth requires that universities work much harder to defeat the tyrants of this world, trumped-up bully boys who are embedded in every aspect of societies around the world and in all ranks of the military, government, business, and industry. They are the twenty-first-century equivalent of the robber barons of the nineteenth century who believed that the goal of the expansionist colonial enterprise was to ensure their own incredible wealth and privilege at the expense of others, both mere lesser individuals and entire civilizations. This is a race and class struggle that universities must address.

There can be no reconciliation with the past if there is not first an understanding of truth even if it is differentiated, complex, and contested. Universities must help us to come to terms with this past. If we don't, as the old adage goes, we are doomed to repeat it. Specialization, and an increasingly labour-market-focused higher education, means that fewer and fewer of today's university students study other cultures, histories, languages, and literatures, in other words the humanities and arts. This lack contributes to societies deficient in understanding and knowledge that would better enable them to fight for themselves and for others.

If we don't know about the unbelievable harm authoritarian strongman tyrants of the past have done, we will be helpless in the face of ruthless tyranny. "The banality of evil," so eerily exposed by the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals and the reportage of philosopher Hannah Arendt (1963) serves to remind us of this truth.

The great Canadian socialist politician Tommy Douglas, along with those of his generation, experienced the rise of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism; Canada fought with allies in wars against these dangerous "isms." Douglas understood that:

> fascism begins the moment a ruling class, fearing the people may use their political democracy to gain economic democracy, begins to destroy political democracy in order to retain its power of exploitation and special privilege. (Douglas, n.d.)

Up against such hard truths, what can a university be for? It seems to us that this question is almost as protean as asking about the meaning of life. If there were a simple answer, if only truth were that easy, then perspectives as different as hedonism and puritanism might be easily

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reconciled in an understanding that nuance and subtlety are lost if we seek easy short-cuts to the truth. Working to make a better world is not merely an individualistic endeavour; a world that is more just and equitable requires the commitment of entire institutions, particularly schools and universities.

Educators over the years have been warmed and inspired by the quotation attributed to Plutarch: "The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled." Surely that is what, at least in part, a university is for. Do these conflicting images of fire capture the contradictions inherent in today's university where knowledge is under siege?

We have valued highly the image of the lighthouse to represent the university; ancient lighthouses of course were once giant bonfires, signalling and warning of dangers below. The iconic image of the lighthouse, used for the symposium that instigated this publication, captures the glow of a light that guides us in new and safer directions, helping to safely navigate difficult waters. A beacon is a comfort to those who have lost their way, and the constancy of the lighthouse evokes the vigilance of standing on guard. Piya Chatterjee, in her chapter speaks of an "ethical charge [that] helps me anchor myself in these choppy waters and the jagged shoals which lie close under their surface." This ethical charge is her own personal lighthouse as she navigates the dangers of researching "others" from her own privileged yet compromised position.

Tammy Ratt, in her chapter calling for the need for Indigenous knowledge in universities, draws on the image of waskway, the birch tree, and its many uses in traditional cultures to represent the concept of all things being interrelated. The birch provides sap and shelter and medicines and, of course, hardwood to build with and to make fire. Trees have been potent symbols of life in cultures, mythologies, and religions across time.

The tree is a symbol that challenges us in our institutions of teaching and learning to ensure that such magnificence can, should, will, and must continue into the future. That is the threat and the inspiration, and that is the truth the academy must nurture and seek.

Let us not take for granted the precarious freedoms scholars in universities in democratic nations currently, though imperfectly, access as tools to complete their work, for it has not been long the case. In fact, it has only been a little more than a century that it has existed in higher education as it is currently conceptualized in North America. Academic freedom is most succinctly defined as "freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and freedom of extramural utterance and action" (aaup, n.d., p. 292).

As the chapters in this collection have explored, the threats universities and scholars face are many and include, among others, a creeping authoritarianism and democratic backsliding; growing adaptation of artificial intelligence, anti-intellectualism, and seeping post-truth rot.

Other threats include shrinking funding and ongoing government attempts to repurpose higher education as only an individual benefit and strictly to service the labour market and industry. Ever-present, too, is resistance to and resentment of change and initiatives that champion equity, diversity, and inclusion.

As a final thought, we wish to leave you with this slightly updated Greek proverb: "A society grows great when old folks plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit." A properly functioning, reimagined, and fully aspirational university is, then, just that: an investment in the world's collective future. /OS

The preceding article is an excerpt from *Knowledge Under Siege: Charting a future for Universities* edited by Marc Spooner and James McNinch, with contributions from: Whitney Blaisdell, Consuelo Chapela, Piya Chatterjee, Jonathan R. Cole, Sheila Cote-Meek, Shannon Dea, Kevin K.Kumashiro, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Simon Marginson, James McNinch, Peter S. McInnis, Liz Morrish, Christopher Newfield, Tammy Ratt, Tom Sperlinger, Malinda S. Smith, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Marc Spooner, & Joel Westheimer.

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