

Tories' platform tilts precariously on 'parental rights'

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Of all the risks undertaken by Manitoba's political parties in this provincial election, none are quite as perilous as the Progressive Conservatives' flirtation with the "parental rights" movement.

In August, prior to the start of the official campaign, PC Leader Heather Stefanson announced a plan to bolster parental rights in the Public Schools Act. It has since become a major plank of the Tory re-election platform.

The Tories are brandishing "Fighting for Manitoba Parents" signs and pamphlets. More recently, Fort Whyte candidate Obby Khan was featured in advertisements and videos to support promote the parental rights policy.

In many ways, this is an unusual tack. The Tories are no doubt aware the term "parental rights" is a rallying cry in the United States for far-right, anti- LGBTTQ+ activists looking to drive all reference to gender and sexuality from public school curriculum.

According to FutureEd, a nonpartisan U.S. education think tank, 85 parental rights bills in 26 states were passed last year; this year, so far, another 62 bills are currently working their way through 24 state legislatures.

FutureEd found most of the bills were direct attacks on LGBTTQ+ students and families — the most famous of which is Florida's controversial 2022 "Don't Say Gay Law." For those bills that do touch on gender, the most common requirement is schools notify parents and seek consent if a student wants to adopt a gender identity different from their biological sex.

In Canada, to date, there have only been a few skirmishes over parental rights in provinces such as New Brunswick and Saskatchewan. However, there is little doubt the movement is growing.

The toxic attacks on library and school boards in Manitoba this year are clearly off-shoots of the broader parental rights movement.

Why would the Tories dabble in this controversial ideology?

When you're at risk of losing a seven-year grip on power, even the riskiest strategies start to look more and more reasonable. Despite efforts to encrypt their pledge with vague language, there is clear evidence the Tories are fully aware they are aligning themselves with the broader parental rights movement.

The PC pledge outlines several amorphous "rights" parents would get from the amended law: to be informed about curriculum; to be consented before any image of a child is made, shared or stored; and advance notice of any presentations made by someone from outside the school system.

However, there was also a pledge to guarantee the right to be involved in addressing incidents of bullying and "other behaviour changes."

When pressed, Stefanson said that reference does mean school staff will have a legal obligation to tell parents if a child has adopted a different gender identity. "Parents know what's best and in the best interest of their kids," she said.

Perhaps, but they won't know what happens if they object to something.

Will schools be obligated to remove reading materials, change curriculum or ban certain outside groups or individuals from visiting schools if they receive one complaint? How many complaints would force a school to take action and what actions would they be obligated to take?

The policy is silent on all those questions. When confronted, Stefanson has only said: "Parents will decide."

The broader question is whether this an idea that can propel the Tories to victory?

A July survey found half of Manitoba respondents believed schools had to both notify parents and seek consent if a child wants to be identified as a different gender. Experts in child education decried the survey as lacking nuance, and pointed out notifying parents against the wishes of a child could open them up to all forms of harm, including at the hands of parents.

The challenge for the Tories is to somehow stop voters from seeing their parental rights pledge as part of the broader attack on LGBTTQ+ children and families. If voters connect the dots, it will not only galvanize opposition to the PC re-election plans, it will undoubtedly estrange moderate PC voters.

Parental rights may play well in a handful of electoral districts where political sensibilities already skew much farther right. However, in many Winnipeg ridings, it's hard to see how this will mobilize incredibly valuable moderate conservative voters.

Although Stefanson has tried to soften the language, parental rights is a movement committed to exploiting parental emotions to portray the mere mention of LGBTTQ+ issues in schools as dangerous to children.

The term "parental rights" is a green light for aggrieved activists to demean and devalue the lives of other people with different views of sexuality and gender. It is hate masquerading as a motherhood issue.

One way or the other, the adoption of the language of parental rights will play a role in determining the outcome of this election.

It will either rally right-wing voters to save the PC party or it will collapse Tory support and bury Stefanson under a mountain of disillusionment.

dan.lett@winnipegfreepress.com