

DO WE TRUST THE GOVERNMENT?

The citizens of Saskatchewan know that Crown corporations act in the public interest to provide services and revenue to the province that private corporations do not always do. Sasktel provides internet and cellular coverage to pretty much the entire province at competitive rates. SGI provides car insurance that is cheaper than private insurance. Natural gas to heat our homes and businesses is delivered by SaskEnergy and electricity by SaskPower. Without these publicly-owned corporations, many Saskatchewan residents, especially in northern and rural areas, would either have to pay a great deal more for these services or do without altogether.

But our Crown corporations are under threat. In the spring, the Sask Party government passed legislation, Bill 40, that permits the privatization of 49% of a Crown corporation without the public process that would otherwise be required under another law. Bill 40 also says that winding up (shutting down) a Crown corporation is not privatization.

Bill 40 was also used to wind up the Saskatchewan Transportation Company. As Saskatchewan residents are finding out already, this has deprived many people of the means to travel from one community to another, including for medical appointments and the like. The end of STC has also complicated sending lab samples for testing, library materials for interlibrary loans, and the shipping of countless goods such as farm machinery parts.

Saskatchewan residents have such strong support for the Crown corporations because they know the valuable services the Crowns provide—services that would certainly be more expensive through the private sector but perhaps not available at all. That is why there has been a great deal of controversy about Bill 40. That is likely why Premier Wall announced a couple of weeks ago that his government has listened and will repeal the Bill. However, the Throne Speech opening this session of the Legislature indicated that the repeal will *not* include the repeal of the winding up portion. This means the government will retain the legal power to shut down all or part of a major Crown corporation without the public input required under *The Crown Corporations Public Ownership Act*.

Some might say that the partial repeal is required because the Saskatchewan Transportation Company (STC) was shut down in accordance with Bill 40. However, that is not true because, unless the repeal Bill was made retroactive, the STC shutdown would not be affected. In other words, if the Premier was truly listening to the people, a complete repeal of Bill 40 is called for.

The possibility of a partial repeal is very suspicious. Just last week, new legislation was introduced in the Legislature that would change the law governing SaskEnergy. Some will recall that the Devine government (for which Brad Wall was a functionary) split SaskEnergy off from SaskPower and was going to privatize it until opposition from the public and the opposition NDP forced it to back off.

At the moment, SaskEnergy and TransGas, both Crown corporations, have exclusive jurisdiction over our natural gas distribution system. A change to that has, until now, required public scrutiny and debate in the Legislature. The proposed amendments, however, would allow the cabinet to make these changes by regulation *without* public debate and scrutiny. If the legislation passes in its present form, it means that the government could (a) wind down the gas distribution network; (b) quickly pass a regulation to permit private ownership of the gas distribution system; and (c) sell off the distribution system assets to those private owners. Much the same could happen with other Crown corporations: selling off the fibre optic network for Sasktel, for example.

This would be privatization in an underhanded way and very contrary to Premier Wall's statements about listening to the public and deciding to repeal Bill 40. That is why there should be a complete repeal of Bill 40. Privatization could still occur, but the government would have to do it openly with full scrutiny and debate and with the supporting vote of the people of Saskatchewan.

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