SPECIAL ISSUE ON ORGANIZING FOR AUSTERITY: THE NEOLIBERAL STATE, REGULATING LABOUR AND WORKING CLASS RESISTANCE

The "New Saskatchewan"
Neoliberal Renewal or Redux?

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Abstract
The release of Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* has popularized the notion that neoliberalism has relied on the rhetoric of crisis and emergency to persuade citizens to accept its economic dictates. How then does one "sell" the neoliberal vision when there can be no recourse to crisis rhetoric, particularly to a population steeped in a social democratic political culture? It is this question that this essay attempts to resolve by investigating the discourse of the "New Saskatchewan" that has been a favourite and recurrent meme of the Saskatchewan Party since the 2003 electoral campaign. This paper will argue that rather than relying on the rhetoric of crisis, the "New Saskatchewan" puts forward a discourse of prosperity that promises to unleash the full economic potential of the province through neoliberal economic policy. Moreover, the "New Saskatchewan" (NS) discourse has been specifically tailored to advance this neoliberal project in Saskatchewan by taking special care to address the local specificities unique to the politics of the province, while drawing upon historical narratives and themes that have been emblematic of Saskatchewan political history.

Résumé
La parution du livre *The Shock Doctrine* par Naomi Klein a popularisé l'idée que le néolibéralisme dépend d'une rhétorique de crise et d'urgence afin de persuader les citoyens d'accepter ses préceptes économiques. Comment peut-on vendre la vision néolibérale lorsqu'on ne peut pas recourir à une rhétorique de crise, en particulier vis-à-vis d'une population imprégnée d'une culture politique social-démocrate? Cet article s'adresse à cette question en examinant le discours de la Nouvelle Saskatchewan qui a été un mème favori et récurrent du parti Saskatchewanais depuis la campagne électorale de 2003. Cet article soutient que, plutôt que de se baser sur une rhétorique de crise, la Nouvelle Saskatchewan propose un discours de prospérité en promettant de déclencher le potentiel économique de la province par l'entremise d'une politique économique néo-libérale. Qui plus est, le discours de la Nouvelle Saskatchewan (NS) a été spécifiquement ajusté pour avancer le projet néo-libéral en Saskatchewan en

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abordant le caractère unique de la politique de la province, tout en puisant dans les récits historiques et thèmes qui ont été emblématiques de l'histoire politique de la Saskatchewan.

The implementation of neoliberalism throughout the western liberal democracies has often been framed less as a choice and more an inevitability. Thatcher's mantra "that there is no alternative," was premised on the assumption that global markets would unduly punish those that failed to accept the cold market logic of neoliberal economics. Naomi Klein (2007) has more recently popularized the notion that the institution of neoliberalism has relied on the rhetoric of crisis and emergency to 'persuade' citizens to accept its' economic dictates.

Certainly, the history of neoliberalism in Canada has followed much of this script.

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Brian Mulroney's inaugural foray into neoliberal austerity in the late 1980s and early 1990s was prefaced by dire warnings that Canada was "choking on debt" imperilling the country's very sovereignty (*Toronto Star*, 13 November 1992; Winsor 1989). Similarly, Paul Martin's 1995 neoliberal budget was presaged with allusions to Mexico's peso crisis, International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed structural adjustment and eventual fiscal ruin for the country if the debt and deficits were not immediately slain (Clarke 1997, 83-84).[1]

The use of debt and deficit discourse to prepare the way for neoliberalism has certainly not been confined to the federal government. In Ontario, Premier Mike Harris claimed the province was "bankrupt" on the eve of his government's draconian first "Common Sense" budget, declaring that "major change" and even "amputation" of social programs was a required necessity (Wright 1995, A1). Alberta's Ralph Klein was equally adept at using debt crisis rhetoric. As Taras and Tupper (1994, 71) explained at the time, the Klein government "used its crusade against the deficit [to initiate] a program of social engineering, the reordering of

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[1] For a wider discussion of the strategies used to "sell" neoliberalism to Canadians since the 1970s, see Enoch 2007.

societal institutions and priorities to fit a particular ideological mould that is virtually without precedent in recent Canadian history." Even in social democratic Saskatchewan, the discourse of economic crisis was a prime rhetorical lever used to roll out the Romanow government's Third Way variant of neoliberalism in the early 1990s (McGrane 2006).

In this sense, we can view the use of debt crisis discourse as constituting what Marjorie Griffin Cohen calls a "conditioning framework;" the means to publicly legitimize the withdrawal of the state from key areas of social provision. "The economic logic for deconstructing the welfare state" Cohen (1997, 33) writes, "had to become part of the subconscious way people understood the working of the economic system in order to erase the public's attachment to 'expensive' social programs."

We might say then, that in Canada, it has been the "stick" of fiscal crisis much more than the "carrot" of purported economic prosperity implicit in neoliberal discourse that has been utilized as the means to "sell" neoliberal policy to a usually sceptical, if not recalcitrant public.

How then does one "sell" the neoliberal vision when there can be no recourse to crisis rhetoric, particularly to a population steeped in a social democratic political culture? This is the situation that has characterized Saskatchewan politics over the past five years. Brad Wall's Saskatchewan Party government inherited a vibrant economy that has outpaced the rest of the country and has (so far) been relatively unaffected by the global recession (McGrane 2007). How then, has the Wall government sought to "sell" its variant of neoliberalism in Saskatchewan at a time of supposed economic prosperity and to a population that still remains relatively wedded to the social democratic culture of the past? It is this question that this essay attempts to resolve by investigating the discourse of the "New Saskatchewan" that has been a favourite and recurrent meme of the Saskatchewan Party since the 2003 electoral campaign. This paper will argue that rather than relying on the rhetoric of crisis, the "New Saskatchewan" puts forward a discourse of prosperity that promises to unleash the full economic potential of the province through neoliberal economic policy. Moreover, the "New Saskatchewan" (NS) discourse has been specifically tailored to advance this neoliberal project in Saskatchewan by taking special care to address the local specificities unique to the politics of the province, while drawing upon historical narratives and themes that have been emblematic of Saskatchewan political history.

To investigate this question, this paper will first describe the dominant themes within neoliberal discourse and the importance of

language to the neoliberal project. Following this, the contours of the discourse of the 'New Saskatchewan' will be outlined drawing upon Saskatchewan Party election platforms and from speeches, statements and interviews with Brad Wall from 2004 until the present. The historical affinities and differences of the NS discourse to the rhetoric of the Ross Thatcher and Grant Devine governments will also be considered. To conclude, the efficacy of the NS discourse to persuade the public to embrace neoliberalism as the way forward will be evaluated.

Neoliberalism and Discourse

Despite being what Robert McChesney (1998) describes as "the defining political economic paradigm of our time," the spread of neoliberal economic policies remains uneven, as various jurisdictions display differing levels of ideological and political adherence to the doctrine (Birch and Mykhnenko 2010). Nevertheless, Birch and Mykhnenko identify five core principles that have been emblematic of neoliberalism wherever it has been implemented:

> *privatization* of state-run assets (firms, council housing, et cetera); *liberalization* of trade in goods and capital investment; *monetarist* focus on inflation control and supply-side dynamics; *deregulation* of labour and product markets to reduce 'impediments' to business; and, the *marketization* of society through public-private partnerships and other forms of commodification. (Birch and Mykhnenko 2010, 5)

As Norman Fairclough (2005, 31) observes, discourse is essential to the support and legitimacy of the neoliberal project because it relies centrally on the process of imposing new representations on the world as it makes a "contingent set of policy choices appear to be a matter of inexorable and irreversible world change." The ability of neoliberalism to present itself as an inevitable and ineluctable result of progress requires a supporting discourse that buttresses its truth claims. While all political projects rely on discursive representations to win public support, the discourse of neoliberalism contains a number of distinctive elements that have been regularly utilized to garner popular legitimacy. Fairclough identifies the various symbolic resources that have been deployed in pursuit of the neoliberal project as follows:

> This [neoliberal] discourse includes a narrative of progress; the globalized world offers unprecedented opportunities for 'growth' through intensified

'competition,' but requiring unfettered 'free trade' and the dismantling of 'state bureaucracy' and 'unaffordable' welfare programmes, 'flexibility' of labour, 'transparency,' 'modernization' and so forth. This discourse projects and contributes to actualizing new forms of productive activity, new social relations, new forms of identity, new values, etc. It appears in specific forms and transformations in different spheres of life (Fairclough 2000, 148).

What this often means in practice is that neoliberal discourse attempts to create a new individualized "citizen-subject," encouraging people to see themselves as individualized and active subjects solely "responsible for enhancing their own well-being" without recourse to state aid or assistance (Larner 2000,13). For Wendy Brown, this can produce the "citizen-consumer" for whom:

> navigating the social becomes entirely one of discerning, affording, and procuring a personal solution to every socially produced problem. This is depoliticization on an unprecedented level: the economy is tailored to it, citizenship is organized by it, the media are dominated by it, and the political rationality of neoliberalism frames and endorses it. (Brown 2006, 704)

Collective provision and social citizenship are anathema to this conception, as responsibility for everything from employment and education to health and well-being are shifted from the state to the individual. Under such a regime we must become "Entrepreneurs of the Self," making continuous personal investments in skills, training, education, and health in order to both increase our marketability in a competitive labour market and to weather the risk and insecurity emblematic of the neoliberal economic paradigm (Peters 2001). Life becomes a "continuous economic capitalization of the self" (Rose 1999, 161).[2]

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However, despite these continuities, the discourse used to support neoliberal policies can be as equally heterogenous as the application of neoliberalism itself. Fairclough (2005, 31) observes that in the case of a

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[2] We need to be cognizant that the intent of neoliberal discourse to produce an individualized subjectivity does not necessarily make it so. Too often the adoption of individualizing practices by persons are assumed to entail a wholesale embrace of neoliberal rationality, when the adoption of these practices may be more a matter of routine economic survival. The failure to adequately locate resistance to these discourses and practices can make it appear that they have been internalized, when the reality may be quite the opposite. For a critique of this tendency in academic studies of individualizing discourses and practices in the workplace, see Thompson and Ackroyd 1995.

strategy such as neoliberalism which has been "so widely diffused, on so many different scales, and recontextualized in so many different countries, institutions and organizations," that we are often faced with a "complex field of dispersal in narratives and discourses," where as well as "recognizable continuities we find considerable diversity, associated with the proliferation of contexts and circumstances." Thus, neoliberal discourse must fashion itself according to local specificities and historical contingencies unique to the terrain in which it attempts to legitimize its project. Indeed, the Saskatchewan Party's deployment of its own unique brand of neoliberal discourse affirms this observation as it must carefully navigate the public's underlying social democratic sentiments and collective sensibilities all while simultaneously attempting to undermine this attachment.

Neoliberalism in the New Saskatchewan

The advent of neoliberalism in Saskatchewan certainly did not begin with Brad Wall and the Saskatchewan Party. Grant Devine's Progressive Conservative government in the 1980s displayed many of the hallmarks of neoliberal politics that were newly emerging at the time. Similarly, Roy Romanow's adoption of "Third Way" social democracy in the 1990s – or what others have called "neoliberalism with a human face" – shifted the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) away from the traditional politics of social democracy towards the neoliberal consensus dominant during the period (Hansen 2003; McGrane 2006). Therefore, while neoliberalism is certainly not "new" to Saskatchewan, Wall's Saskatchewan Party has made a concerted effort to re-package neoliberalism as constituting a "new" politics for the province. How the Saskatchewan Party has sought to "sell" its own variant of neoliberalism to the Saskatchewan public is the primary focus of this investigation.

Brad Wall's Saskatchewan Party government has embarked on a decidedly neoliberal agenda since it first came to power in 2007. Since taking office, the Wall government has rolled back the rights of labour with a slew of legislation designed to essentially neuter organized labour's right to strike and organize in the workplace.[3] Without any consultation with organized labour, the government has passed Bill 5, *The Public Service Essential Services Act*, that allows employers the discretion to designate employees "essential service" providers, thereby prohibiting those

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[3] Wall characterized Saskatchewan's previous labour legislation under the NDP as making the province "look like Québec or Cuba" (Wall, cited in Doll 2007).

classified from participating in strike action. Bill 6, *An Act to Amend the Trade Union Act*, enhances the ability of employers to "communicate facts and opinions" to workers during organizing drives and changes the certification process to a mandatory secret ballot that gives employers more license to intimidate and coerce workers (Saskatchewan Federation of Labour 2008). Bill 80*, The Construction Industry Labour Relations Amendment Act* permits employers to "voluntarily recognize" a particular union if the shop isn't already certified, allowing the *employer* to select the union that will supposedly represent workers, opening the way for quasi-yellow-dog unions like the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) to gain a foothold in the province's construction industry (Mandyrk 2009, A6). More recently, the government introduced Bill 43, *The Trespass to Property Act,* which has the potential to greatly restrict the ability of workers to picket their place of employment during strike action.

A recent International Labour Organization (ILO) decision has offered a stinging rebuke to the government's package of labour legislation. The ILO Freedom of Association Committee found, among other things, that:

> The government had an obligation to consult with the labour movement and it failed to do so; that the new essential services legislation contravened the ILO's principles on freedom of association by granting authority in the government itself to define what services are "essential" rather than an independent third party; and that the requirement for workers to have to collect union membership evidence on behalf of at least 45% eligible employees was too high since it would make it exceedingly difficult for workers to organize (Doorey 2010).

Indeed, the breadth and scope of the Wall government's attack on the labour movement in Saskatchewan has resulted in the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) and thirty other unions and locals launching a Charter challenge that questions the very constitutionality of the legislation (*Leader-Post*, 16 September 2008).[4]

In keeping with neoliberal policy prescriptions, the Wall government has shown its propensity for deregulation by entering into the New West Partnership with British Columbia and Alberta. The agreement - a carbon copy of the Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA) that the government had previously opposed - purports to

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[4] For a detailed discussion of the court challenge, see Muthu 2010.

remove 'barriers' to trade and investment between the three provinces and invests the power to ultimately determine what measures constitute a restriction or impairment of trade within an unelected trade panel. Critics of the agreement fear it will lead to a "race to the bottom" as the lowest standards and regulations of each respective province are adopted as the least restrictive to inter-provincial trade (Gilbert 2010).[5] Recent moves by the Wall government to endorse the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) "Red Tape Awareness Week" as a means to "identifying and eliminating regulatory or bureaucratic requirements that serve as barriers to growth," presage an even more intense deregulatory campaign in the future (Wood 2011).

The Wall government has been less aggressive on the privatization front, mainly due to the public's attachment to the provincial crown corporations. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the Saskatchewan Party's failure to win the 2003 provincial election hinged on the Party's reluctance to rule out privatization of the crowns during the campaign (McGrane 2008; Rayner and Beaudry-Mellor 2009).[6] However, the government has restricted the operations of the crowns through its "Saskatchewan First" policy that forced the crowns to divest of their out-of-province assets and discouraged the crowns from "competing with the private sector" within the province (*Star-Phoenix*, 28 October 2008). Lastly, while the government has not pursued an openly ambitious plan of privatization, they are in the process of selling off the Saskatchewan Communications Network (SCN) - a public education cable channel - in response to budget shortfalls resulting from the collapse of potash revenues in 2009-2010 (Wood 2010, A1). Furthermore, the government has not been reluctant to contract out public services to private providers, with the opening of the privately owned Omni Surgical Centre in Regina the most recent example (Cowan and Hall 2010, A1).

One of the key principles of neoliberal governance is the prioritization of market logic as a principle of government itself (Couldry 2010). The Wall government's embrace of this aspect of neoliberalism is best exemplified by their out-sourcing of economic development policy to "Enterprise Saskatchewan," a multi-sector government agency tasked with

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[5] For a critique of the original TILMA agreement, see Weir 2007.

[6] Brad Wall himself acknowledged this, conceding that "the biggest mistake the Saskatchewan Party has made in its ten years," was "not being clear enough on its stance on Crown corporations and not respecting the citizens' strong desire to keep them public" (Wall cited in Mandryk 2007, A16).

providing recommendations and advice for the removal and reduction of barriers to economic growth within the province. The self-declared role of the agency is to "create the best environment for business - and then get out of the way" (Enterprise Saskatchewan 2010). Enterprise Saskatchewan has been the showpiece of the government's economic policy since 2004. The agency is designed to "take the politics out of economic development" by preventing the picking of "winners and losers" by the government. For the "first time in Saskatchewan," the Enterprise Saskatchewan Plan will see "government cede significant control over the formation and implementation of economic development strategies to a broad partnership of economic stakeholders with the full support of the Premier and Executive Council" (Saskatchewan Party 2004, 11). However, despite the claims of inclusion, the board is actually dominated by business representatives with only a token representative from organized labour. That any consideration at all beyond the interests of business are attended to by the agency is belied by its own slogan, "our business is business" (Enterprise Saskatchewan 2010).

Enterprise Saskatchewan and the government's attitude towards past efforts of economic development in the province provides an ideal launching point to investigate the government's construction of the "New Saskatchewan" discourse and how it attempts to support the advancement of the neoliberal project in the province.

The Discourse of the New Saskatchewan
As the above suggests, the NS discourse is premised on creating a binary opposition between the future and the past, with the province's social democratic past responsible for stagnation and lethargy, while the neoliberal future is associated with optimism and prosperity. Within Saskatchewan Party discourse on economic development, this binary is ever-present. According to this narrative, Saskatchewan has consistently failed to realize its economic potential, despite being blessed with an abundance of natural resources and the most fertile farmland in the country:

> Saskatchewan's wealth in human and natural resources is truly staggering. Given our potential, Saskatchewan should have finished the 20th century as one of Canada's economic leaders - ready to compete in the emerging global economy. Instead, our province entered this century after having spent most of the last century as a 'have-not' province (Saskatchewan Party 2004, 1).

The blame for this economic malaise is squarely placed on the social democratic economic policies of the past:

> Perhaps we have become comfortable with the notion that geographically large and sparsely populated jurisdictions must rely on the public sector and government involvement at every turn for their economic development strategies. This would appear to be the case in Saskatchewan, where governments of three different political stripes have allowed public sector solutions to eclipse the potential of private investment, innovation and entrepreneurship as sustainable economic development options for growth (Saskatchewan Party 2004, 2).[7]

The results of pursuing this state-led economic strategy is characterized as an abject failure:

> It is clear that Saskatchewan's economic strategy over the past 60 years has failed to improve the integrity of our economy, grow our population, attract investment or adequately capture and commercialize intellectual capital and innovation. It's time to try something new (Saskatchewan Party 2004, 6).

In order to unleash the full economic potential of the province, neoliberal policy prescriptions must be applied generously to every facet of the economy in order to remove the barriers to growth that have been left to harden over the past sixty years. In this sense, the application of neoliberal principles allows the province to return to a historical trajectory of prosperity that had been de-railed by the adoption of social democracy. Brad Wall makes this explicit:

> After 1941 something changed, and the optimism of the past shifted...Our leadership for much of the last 60 years forgot that Saskatchewan was built by individuals and by families and by communities and not by government...It is a leadership, I believe, that has resigned our province to mediocrity at best and

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[7] It is interesting to note the blame here is placed on *all* past governing political parties for advancing public sector solutions over and above the private sector - despite the prior governing Liberal and Conservative parties' vocal advocacy for "free enterprise." In this sense, the Saskatchewan Party appears more intent on indicting the past political culture of social democracy in the province, rather than just the New Democratic Party alone.

unsustainability at worst...it is a government that has more memories of the past than dreams for the future (Wall cited in Saccone 2005, A9).[8]

The renewal of optimism and confidence in the province with the election of the Wall government is a much vaunted part of the NS discourse, as the freeing of private enterprise from the shackles of the past is said to coincide with an "attitudinal change" and a "new collective vision" for the province (Wall 2010). In opposition to the "old Saskatchewan," the "New Saskatchewan" desires to inculcate the province with a new entrepreneurial spirit, which fosters "job-creators" rather than "job-takers:"

> In our platform we talked very specifically about increasing the availability of entrepreneurial education in our school system, or at least introducing the option wherever we can. We have done a great job in our province over the years, (with) a great education system. But we train job takers and we ought to be introducing the concept of people considering being job makers. There are some things we can do from an educational standpoint with regard to [sic] entrepreneurial and an entrepreneurial environment (Wall cited in Moen 2008).[9]

According to the government, this new "enterprising, entrepreneurial Saskatchewan economy will be impatient, relentless, aggressive, self-promoting and even brash. Profit within that economy will be lauded instead of envied" (Saskatchewan Party 2004, 27).

The deployment of such entrepreneurial discourse by neoliberal governments is certainly not new, as it has a long history going back to the Margaret Thatcher government of the 1980s (See Abercrombie and Keat 1990; Peters 2001). Indeed, Thatcher's view of enterprising culture was inextricably linked to the political and the moral challenge supposedly posed by the "permissive and anti-enterprise culture fostered by social democratic institutions since 1945" (Smyth 1999, 440-441). Certainly, it is a central tenet of neoliberalism that the Keynesian policies of social

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[8] Why Wall chose 1941 as the date "something changed" is curious given that Liberal premier William J. Patterson was in power. However, three years later Tommy Douglas and the CCF would win their first provincial election.

[9] According to the Saskatchewan Party's 2007 platform: "A Saskatchewan Party government will work with local school boards, the business community and community based organizations such as Junior Achievement, to enhance business literacy, entrepreneurial and career education in Saskatchewan schools" (Saskatchewan Party 2007, 6).

protection contributed to a "risk adverse" society that eliminates many of the incentives to create wealth; a position that would most certainly garner sympathy within the Saskatchewan Party (Rothenberg 1984, 148).

As Michael Peters (2001, 60-61) argues, neoliberal appeals for an "enterprise culture" are premised on the need for cultural reconstruction in order to ensure economic survival within the competitive global economy. The term "enterprise" is often used as an antidote to an alleged "culture of dependency" promoted by the Keynesian welfare state that can only be overcome through the acquisition of entrepreneurial values of self-reliance, personal investment, competition and market rationality. This is in direct opposition to social democratic principles of equality, equity and collective social provision.

While the NS discourse is careful not to accuse the *people* of Saskatchewan of a culture of dependency, it certainly indicts governments past of fostering such a climate. For example, Brad Wall's well-worn "New Saskatchewan" speech accuses the "Saskatchewan that was" as one of "managed decline," always "looking for a hand-out" from the rest of the country, whereas the "Saskatchewan that is," "plans for growth," with "its sleeves rolled up" ready to work for greater prosperity (Wall 2010).

Indeed, this representation of past social democratic governments as an indolent elite that leeches off the wealth of others is made explicit by Brad Wall in his parody of Tommy Douglas' famous "Mouseland" speech that Wall delivered to the 2006 Saskatchewan Party convention and which is worth quoting at length.[10] In Wall's "updated" rendition, 'Mouseland' has been governed by the mice for sixty years:

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> But after sixty years, other animals began to realize something about mice. They're not exactly the most productive species in the animal kingdom. In fact, they don't really produce anything except droppings. What they are good at is wrecking stuff that others have produced. They chew holes in things. They just generally leave a mess wherever they go…. 'We can't get rid of the mice. The mice run things. The mice have always run things. That's why they call it Mouseland.' And all the other animals heard this and just nodded sadly in agreement. Except for one old gray horse named Milt. He'd been around longer than the rest of the animals… And he said, 'That's not quite true.' 'The mice don't have to run things. In fact,' he said 'when given a clear choice between cats and mice…who would choose a mouse? They wreck things!' And at that moment, all the other animals looked up and down the line… And they realized

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[10] For the original Douglas "Mouseland" speech, visit http://www.saskndp.com/mouseland.

something. There were more of them than there were mice. They were all different animals, but they had a lot of things in common. They didn't like the mice wrecking all their food. They didn't like their babies moving to that place that had never been run by the mice. They didn't like standing in line when they were sick. Most of all, they were just tired of the mice. They began to realize that a lot of mice in one place for a long time is not a government but an infestation! (Wall 2006).[11]

Besides flirting dangerously with an almost reactionary producerist rhetoric, Wall's parody captures numerous themes of the NS discourse outlined thus far; sixty years of inept social democratic policies have relegated Saskatchewan to 'have-not' status, squandering the province's vast economic potential in exchange for mediocrity and a culture of defeat.[12]

The New Democratic Party is regularly portrayed as mired in this fictive past, representative of the "old" Saskatchewan, tied to tired and outmoded ideologies and ways of thinking (Saskatchewan Party 2007; Wall 2010).[13] In contrast, the Wall government's neoliberal policies are "non-ideological," "pragmatic" and "common-sense." Responding to *Leader-Post* reporter Angela Hall's question on whether the government would adopt "a broader conservative agenda" in a second term, Wall replied:

> I don't know what that means, but just offhand I think you're going to see more common sense solutions to problems we have...All of the examples you've cited, I don't think that's left, middle or right, I think it's common sense. And we'll always be responsive to those kinds of ideas (Wall cited in Hall 2010a).

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[11] In Wall's rendition, the "cats" - originally representing the bourgeoisie in Douglas' version - rescue Mouseland from the inept rule of the "mice." Wall's parody could therefore be seen as inadvertently confirming David Harvey's hypothesis that neoliberalism is all about the "restoration of class power," as the bourgeoisie are once again restored to their rightful position of rule! (See Harvey 2005, 16).

[12] As Chip Bertlet and Matthew Lyons (2000, 6) explain, "one of the staples of repressive and right-wing populist ideology has been producerism, a doctrine that champions the so-called producers in society against both "unproductive" elites and subordinate groups defined as lazy or immoral."

[13] Current NDP leader Dwain Lingenfelter, who could quite accurately be characterized as a third way neoliberal, is regularly portrayed in this light, with Brad Wall depicting him as "a 70's era figure in thrall to nationalization and "Fonzie lunchboxes" and out of touch with the "New Saskatchewan" (Wall cited in Wood 2010b, A5).

Similarly, in his "State of the Province" address to the Saskatoon Chamber of Commerce, Wall again portrays his government as the pragmatic alternative to an ideologically driven past:

> You will see from our government we are not ideologically limited to the way we fund these projects in the future. We will be open to public-private partnerships. We will be open to partnerships with other members of the public sector, with the municipal sector, with federal government and with the private sector. We are going to be interested in results in dealing with this infrastructure deficit, not ideologically handcuffed by pursuing it only in the ways the Government of Saskatchewan has pursued it in the past (Wall 2008).[14]

As many other scholars have demonstrated, claims that neoliberalism is "non-ideological," "beyond left and right," and a "common sense" approach to politics are a central facet of neoliberal discourse (Clarke 2008; Coulter 2009; Weiler 1984). Weiler's description of the discursive representation of neoliberal politicians is particularly germane to how Brad Wall's Saskatchewan Party seeks to represent itself:

> Neo-liberals are not burdened with ideological baggage. They are new politicians with new solutions to the allegedly new problems we face. They are experimenters uninterested in tedious quibbles about method. They are bottom-line men [sic]; they are interested in results (Weiler 1984, 367).

However, as Kendra Coulter (2009, 38) observes, such claims seek to "obfuscate ideological allegiance and camouflage an ideological agenda" by framing political decisions that have profound and differing effects on various elements within society as non-ideological problems in need of technical solutions. Such discourse seeks to erase consideration of structural or systemic inequalities of power by concealing the problems and conflicts of politics behind an appeal to technical expertise (Clarke 2008, 142). In this respect, "the very denial of ideology is an ideological act" as neoliberalism - a decidedly *political* project - is cloaked in the

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[14] The Wall government's decision to oppose the BHP Billiton takeover bid for PotashCorp was also framed as "pragmatic" and "strategic" in response to criticisms from the ideological right that the Saskatchewan Party had betrayed its free-market principles. It may be more true that the Wall government is tremendously reliant on potash revenues - which at its height contributed to one-fifth of provincial revenues - in order to advance its neoliberal agenda more broadly. See CBC News 2009.

respectability of being non-political; merely a natural, common sense approach to problem solving (Coulter 2009, 38-39).

As we have seen, the NS discourse contains many of the hallmarks of neoliberal discourse more generally; it contains a narrative of growth and progress juxtaposed with the demonization of a social democratic political culture responsible for stagnation and a "culture of dependency." It advocates for an "enterprise culture" that seeks to inculcate entrepreneurial values as the means with which to escape our under-achieving, collectivist past and it represents itself as non-ideological and non-political, all while advancing a decidedly political project. However, how "new" is this "'New Saskatchewan" discourse? Brad Wall and the Saskatchewan Party continually depict themselves and their policies as representing a break from the past. However, upon closer scrutiny the New Saskatchewan discourse reveals itself to be not so novel after all.

The Historical Origins of the "New Saskatchewan"

The NS discourse regularly indicts its opponents as being mired in the past, in the "old" Saskatchewan. Yet, the genealogy of the New Saskatchewan discourse illustrates that is equally a product of the past.

In 1964, the provincial Liberals under the leadership of Ross Thatcher defeated the NDP after twenty years in power. Thatcher's promise to the electorate: to bring them a "New Saskatchewan" (Gruending 1990; Eisler 1987). With rhetoric that is eerily familiar to the present, Thatcher declared the province under his leadership, once again "open for business," expressing confidence in private enterprise through "regulations, legislation and support of the entrepreneur" that would make Saskatchewan a safe and profitable climate for private investment (Eisler 1987, 156-157). For Thatcher, the province was "only now recovering from an unhappy 20-year experiment with socialism, an experiment that has cost the province very dearly in jobs and economic development" (*ibid*, 157). Starkly reminiscent of today, Thatcher's "New Saskatchewan" promised to unleash the full economic potential of the province - stifled under the socialist CCF/NDP - through a wave of all too familiar policies: "reduce corporate royalties and taxation, slash the size and influence of government (especially by attacking social spending), sell-off government-owned enterprises to the private sector and bring the labour movement to heel" (Gruending 1990, 49).

While Thatcher was unable to achieve many of these goals during his time in office, Dale Eisler (2005, 81) argues that Thatcher remains a transformative figure because his government introduced the myth of a

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greater future by advancing the argument that the "end of a socialist government, a more welcoming attitude to free enterprise and foreign investment—particularly from the US—would unlock our true economic potential and the myth would finally be achieved."[15]

These ideas would be recycled once again during the Progressive Conservative government of Grant Devine in the 1980s. While the Saskatchewan Tories did not replicate the use of the term "New Saskatchewan," they nevertheless borrowed many of its elements. Devine's 1982 campaign slogan, "There's so much more we can be," again raised the specter of the province's unrealized economic potential. Similar to Saskatchewan Party rhetoric, the NDP was also indicted as growing fat off the province at the people's expense. As one Devine campaign brochure read, "Saskatchewan's great potential has never been more clear. Yet only the government has grown rich" (Progressive Conservative Party of Saskatchewan 1982). Like the Saskatchewan Party today, the Devine government also sought to establish a binary between a stagnant past and a prosperous future:

> The good old province of Saskatchewan is not going to be the same anymore - we're not going to be seventh or eighth anymore - we're going to be number one (Devine cited in Nunn 1982).

> The new spirit of the Saskatchewan people will not turn the clock back (Devine cited in Scott 1986a).

> The choice is between taking the next step forward into the future or stepping back into the past (Devine cited in Scott 1986b).

The means to achieving this prosperous future would of course require the "freeing" of private investment from the imposed constraints of past social democratic governments. Echoing Ross Thatcher, Devine declared the province "open for business," rescinding 750 regulations in his first year of office, slashing corporate taxes and royalty rates, privatizing major crown corporations such as the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan, SaskMinerals and SaskOil, and restricting the right of labour to organize (Biggs and Stobbe 1991; Pitsula and Rasmussen 1990; Spencer 2007).

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[15] Eisler (2005, 72) argues that the "myth of Saskatchewan" is premised on the enduring belief that "Saskatchewan has a much greater economic and social potential than what it has achieved." According to Eisler, this unfulfilled expectation is the "essential force that drives Saskatchewan's economic and political discourse" (70).

The Devine Tories were also in thrall of Thatcherite "Enterprise Culture," believing the government needed to "awaken the entrepreneurial spirit of the people." Indeed, Health Minister Graham Taylor admitted that at the heart of the Devine government's privatization agenda was the need "to change the thinking of the Saskatchewan people" (Pitsula and Rasmussen 1990, 152).

Finally, like the Saskatchewan Party of today, these political decisions were framed as being "above politics." As Pitsula and Rasmussen state:

> This was typical of Devine. Whenever he wanted to push the province to the right, he claimed to be motivated by 'common sense' or to be doing something that 'no reasonable person could object to.' It was a technique for softening his hard ideological edges (Pitsula and Rasmussen 1990, 48).

What this very brief historical summary reveals is that the "New Saskatchewan" discourse treads upon some very old ground. Rather than a break from the past, Brad Wall and the Saskatchewan Party have resuscitated many of the same narratives deployed by every other governing party that has been in opposition to the NDP. So how does the current use of NS discourse differ from that of the past?

In many respects the NS discourse of today operates in a much more favourable environment due to the general acceptance of neoliberalism as the only possible politics in an era of globalized economic competition (Harvey 2005).[16] At the national level, Canadians have been inundated with the argument that neoliberalism is the only way to ensure our economic competitiveness for the past thirty years (Clarke 1997; Enoch 2007).[17] In Saskatchewan, the public is regularly counselled – by governments of all stripes – that we must emulate or surpass the conservative policies of our neighbour Alberta, lest we be passed over for private investment (Hansen 2003; Rushton 2000). Furthermore, with the NDP's embrace of third way neoliberalism since the early 1990s, there is little in the way of an alternative to neoliberal policies offered to the Saskatchewan populace. Many of the current government's policies are the mere continuation of trends originally advanced under the NDP -

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[16] Whether the general public accepts neoliberalism as the only possible politics is certainly contested. However, there can be little argument that among political and economic elites, neoliberalism enjoys broad support (See Enoch 2007; Miller 2010).

[17] For example, the recent debate over corporate taxation has invariably been framed by the Federal Tories as required to ensure Canada's economic competitiveness (See Taber 2011).

particularly in regards to taxes and competition policy (McGrane 2006; Weir 2004).[18] Thus, the NDP has "prepared the way" for the acceptance of neoliberalism for much of the population by advancing many of these policies under the banner of social democracy. There is obviously less room for ideological polarization when both of the mainline parties are in agreement on key aspects of economic policy.

That being said, the Saskatchewan Party has been quite careful to measure its discourse so as not to upset the underlying social democratic sensibilities that still have purchase amongst a significant portion of the electorate. As Pitsula and Rasmussen (1990, 3) observe, "the well-entrenched social democratic tradition of the province requires right-wing political parties in the Province to package their ideology and policy ideas carefully so as not to offend large sections of the electorate." While these traditions may be less "well-entrenched" today, they nevertheless exist, as the Saskatchewan Party discovered to their dismay during the 2003 election. Thus, the NS discourse has refused to adopt the language of aggressive privatization that characterized the Devine-era and have not sought to emulate (at least not to the same degree) the vicious red-baiting of the Thatcher years, although it still regularly paints the NDP as much more to the left of the political spectrum than they actually are.

Perhaps in recognition of these underlying sensibilities, the NS discourse has also put forward the notion that it is the Saskatchewan Party, rather than the NDP, that is the true defender of the vulnerable and the poor. Touting their social policy initiatives in the 2008 Throne Speech, Premier Wall attempted to undermine the association between the NDP and care for society's most vulnerable:

> From a government, from a social democratic government — a group, some self-described socialists — who say, boy, nobody cares like us. That's what they claim. Nobody is there for those who are vulnerable like us in the NDP. Nobody will be there for those who have disabilities or for those without a voice than us. But, Mr Speaker, the truth of it is they weren't there for them — not for years and years and years (Throne Speech Debate 2008).

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[18] It is interesting to note that the ultra-conservative Fraser Institute praised "the historic transformation" of economic policy under the NDP in 2007, ranking the province the third best climate for private investment in the country. Brad Wall's "New Saskatchewan" has more recently been touted as the *second* best province for investment by the Fraser, following behind only Alberta. See Abma 2010; Wood 2007.

In contrast, Brad Wall's New Saskatchewan will offer, "growth and opportunity, security *and* compassion" (Throne Speech Debate 2008, my emphasis). While usurping the historic mantle of social justice from the NDP may prove difficult, the use of compassion within the NS discourse allows the Saskatchewan Party to advance its neoliberal agenda while potentially pre-empting criticisms that it is neglecting the most vulnerable in the province.[19]

Thus, the NS discourse has proved highly adept at negotiating the eccentricities of Saskatchewan politics. While it has been careful to measure itself so as not to offend the social democratic sensibilities of a large portion of the electorate, it has also promoted the neoliberalization of the province as the means to which Saskatchewan can finally achieve its untapped economic potential. By linking the recent economic prosperity of the province to the politics of the "New Saskatchewan," it simultaneously associates all past economic malaise as the sole property of the social democrats and their economic policies, despite the long embrace of neoliberalism by successive NDP governments since 1991. Moreover, rather than associating neoliberalism with "tough choices" and "austerity," the NS discourse portrays neoliberal economic policy as the fount of prosperity, finally able to flow freely now that the ideologically imposed restraints of the past have been jettisoned. In this respect, the discourse of the New Saskatchewan is able to sell the neoliberal project without resort to crisis rhetoric. If there is any element of fear within the NS discourse, it is the fear that a return to the social democratic policies of the past will mean a return to economic mediocrity.

Conclusions

While it is impossible to measure what influence the NS discourse has had on the people of Saskatchewan, there is no doubting the popularity of the current government. Recent polls show the Saskatchewan Party the preferred choice of 57.3 percent of the electorate, with Brad Wall considered the "best choice for premier" by a whopping 73.3 percent of respondents (Hall 2010b). In light of such poll numbers, New Democrat sources are "suggesting that the party could be decimated to between four and eight seats" in the next election. Others are even more pessimistic,

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[19] While much of the Saskatchewan Party's social agenda is in the traditional neoliberal vein of "growing a bigger economic pie" rather than redistributing the "existing economic pie," they have made modest increases to social assistance rates and other low-income supports For a discussion on neoliberal approaches to social justice, see Wicker 1981.

raising the prospect of the party being wiped out completely (Mandryk 2011). While careful not to draw too many conclusions from these numbers, it certainly appears that the NS discourse has resonated with Saskatchewan voters, as its message of prosperity and optimism appears to align with the current mood of the public (Gray 2009).

However, given the fragile nature of resource-based economies and the vagaries of world commodity markets, the discourse of the New Saskatchewan may prove as fleeting as its predecessors. Saskatchewan has always been particularly prone to the cyclical nature of the global economy, characterized by periods of "Boom and Bust." While the NS discourse is quick to argue that those days are part of the "old" Saskatchewan and that those who might counsel caution to the current heady optimism are "running down" the province, the track record of neoliberalism sustaining economic growth in other parts of the world should give us pause.

As many other scholars have forcefully argued, neoliberalism as a strategy for economic growth has been a broad failure - particularly in comparison to the state-led industrial strategies of the Keynesian era (Chang 2008; Harvey 2005; Kotz and McDonough 2008). Harvey argues that while neoliberalism has not been very successful at *generating* wealth, it has been tremendously successful at *redistributing* wealth upwards. Indeed, Harvey (2005, 16) states that, "redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project." The advent of neoliberalism in Saskatchewan has produced similar results, with increased inequality of earnings evident among Saskatchewan families over the past thirty years. Over this period,

> The richest 10 per cent of Saskatchewan families took home the lion's share of the province's economic growth, increasing its share of earnings from twenty-three to twenty-eight per cent. The bottom half of Saskatchewan families have found themselves shut out from economic gains and their share of earnings dropped from twenty-six to twenty-three percent (Gingrich 2009, 41).

Furthermore, inequality in the province has been particularly acute since 2000, with Saskatchewan's after-tax income gap in 2006 the third worst in all of Canada (Gingrich 2009).

Whether the people of the province will accept such growing inequalities as an inevitable part of the 'New Saskatchewan' is an open question. So far, it appears the NS narrative of unlimited prosperity and

growth has managed to conceal the more ugly consequences of neoliberalism from public view. However, while the NS discourse has been aided and abetted by the economic prosperity recently experienced by the province, should Saskatchewan's own brand of neoliberalism demonstrate the same instability and penchant for crisis as it has in the rest of the world, the Wall government may yet have to return to the rhetoric of crisis in order to convince the Saskatchewan public to remain on the neoliberal path.

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