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## OPINION

## In Manitoba, an omnibus bill puts systemic racism against Indigenous people in plain view

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First Nations, already struggling with inadequate access to health care, are disproportionately at risk as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. And yet somehow, by as soon as the end of this week, the Manitoba government will have rammed through its omnibus Bill 2 – the Budget Implementation and Tax Statutes Amendment Act (BITSA) – and in that bill, and during this pandemic, two buried items threaten to further perpetuate poverty and vulnerability for First Nations people in Manitoba.

The first policy change affects children living in foster care, 90 per cent of whom are First Nations children. These kids are meant to receive help from the federal government through the Children’s Special Allowances program, which is supposed to flow through child welfare agencies to foster families to use for the benefit of children. At least, that should be how it works in Canada. But starting in 2005, Manitoba’s NDP government redirected the federal money to flow to the province’s general revenues first, arguing that because Manitoba was the jurisdiction paying for

the maintenance of children in care, the money was owed to them. The province argues that it then redirects equivalent funding to foster-care organizations. But this still incentivizes the removal of First Nation children from Nations. The more children in foster care, the more money the province gets from Ottawa.

To date, more than \$338-million has been redirected from Manitoba foster children who are disproportionately First Nations. That would have made a staggering difference in the life of vulnerable children who are taken away from their families and Nations. And yet, here we stand, with an omnibus bill safely sailing toward Royal Assent, which affirms this years-old policy and even adds a clause forbidding court action if any foster children were to pursue the return of this \$338-million through the justice system. Bill 2 denies us even the basic right to seek redress for our children through Canadian law. This is wrong. If I haven't said it enough, let me say this again: It is wrong to steal from First Nations children. It is wrong to take away their basic rights to seek redress for the wrongs committed against them.

Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister's government is also giving itself the power to impose Manitoba Hydro increases, without the historic oversight and public hearings normally conducted by the Public Utilities Board (PUB). Without checks or balances, his cabinet has unilaterally imposed a 2.9-per-cent increase for this coming year for all citizens. That means the average monthly hydro bill of \$368 will jump by \$32 from last winter.

In 2018, the PUB had recommended that Manitoba Hydro create a new residential category for First Nations on-reserve customers, to freeze rates for them. However, Manitoba Hydro appealed this direction to the Manitoba Court of Appeal, and in June, the court nixed the idea of creating a separate category. The court's decision "brings electricity rates in line with provincial legislation which ensures all residential customers across the province, no matter where they live, pay the same rate for their energy that is required under uniform rates legislation" – prompting an increase of 6.5 per cent on the rate for First Nations reserves, which went into effect in September. Now, with Mr. Pallister's new mandated increase, First Nations reserves face a crippling and cumulative 9.6-per-cent increase from the previous year on their

power bills. If this happened in the city of Winnipeg, I suspect there would be a revolt – and rightly so.

This is what systemic racism looks like; it is unconscionable and it is wrong. No other groups of Canadian children have been denied – by the system that is there to protect them – of federal benefits and of the ability to use the legal system to fight for them. No other groups in Manitoba face a more painful price hike for their essential power infrastructure – made even more essential during a stay-inside pandemic – than First Nations people.

I cannot, as Grand Chief, say loudly enough that this is wrong. Hear me now, and hear me clearly: This systemically racist omnibus bill, which steps on the necks of First Nations people as it masquerades as being “good for taxpayers,” cannot be allowed to cruise easily through the Manitoba legislature.

Opinion polls consistently show that Canadians want change in the nation-to-nation relationship. Canadians support reconciliation, and a new relationship with First Nations based on fairness and mutual respect. I call on all politicians to listen, and to act. I know Mr. Pallister and the Conservative government can hear the AMC, chiefs, and First Nations citizens speaking out and standing side-by-side against these unacceptable provisions of Bill 2.

First Nations are advocating everyday and fasting day in and day out, only for our voices to fall on the deaf ears of this Conservative government and bureaucracy. The silence is deafening. We know the current government can, and should, do better. So do it.

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