

ARTICLE



Building a pro-public movement in Canada

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ABSTRACT

The global “antiprivatization” movement has been remarkably successful at challenging, and even reversing, the threat of privatization, but it has not yet established an equally effective “pro-public” counterpart. In many cases, the default position has been to protect the status quo rather than propose new models of public service delivery. This article discusses the potential for building such a pro-public movement in Canada, exploring opportunities for change and the challenges ahead, using the international experience as a reference point.

KEYWORDS

Canada; privatization; pro-public movement; public services

Introduction

The global antiprivatization movement has been remarkably successful over the past 30 years at challenging privatization. Rigorous research and dogged activism have helped to slow—and in some cases reverse—the privatization juggernaut, exposing its downsides across a wide range of service sectors, from water to health care to prisons.¹

Fighting privatization has been like the proverbial David and Goliath battle, with poorly funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), unions, and community organizations up against deep-pocketed multinational corporations, mainstream media, international financial institutions, and well-heeled consumer associations. Despite this imbalance, the antiprivatization movement has managed to attract widespread support from progressive donors, inspire countless documentaries, and motivate thousands of publications, contributing to a culture of success and a growing belief that the giant of privatization can be slain.²

But much of this antiprivatization movement has become stuck in protest mode, offering insightful critiques of what is wrong with privatization but little in the way of concrete alternatives, serving at times to mask deep-seated problems with existing public service models and even stifling debate about reform. As a result, an otherwise successful global antiprivatization movement has yet to spawn an equally effective pro-public counterpart—that is, a movement that focuses on the (re)building and (re)making of public services rather than protecting the status quo.

By pro-public, I refer to a movement that critically engages with foundational questions about the meaning of public and what constitutes a “good” public service,

along with detailed proposals for actual public service change. It is opposed to commercialized services that operate on a private sector basis, but it is not confined to a singular vision of publicness. Indeed, I argue in this paper that a healthy pro-public movement is necessarily at odds within itself, divided along ideological and practical lines, encouraging debate, and accepting of difference across time, place, and sector.

Such pro-public debates have occurred in the past. The “municipal socialism” movements of the late 1800s and early 1900s saw private services municipalized for the first time in many parts of Europe and North America (though not always for “socialist” reasons).³ The 1930s saw another pro-public shift, with many municipalities scaling up their services to a national and regional level under Keynesian reforms.⁴ There were also widespread experiments with different models of public service delivery under socialist governments from the 1950s.

Most recently, another pro-public movement has begun to emerge in response to the crises of privatization. This movement is still relatively small, geographically scattered, and even more conceptually varied than its progenitors, but it is distinctly pro-public in its orientation, focusing on rebuilding and remaking public services rather than simply critiquing privatization or harkening back to a supposedly golden age of public service delivery (be it socialist or Keynesian). This contemporary movement lacks consistent analytical frameworks, making it difficult at times to know what to include under its banner, but its pro-public objectives and policy proposals are clear: take services out of private hands in an effort to create publicly owned and publicly operated services.

Similar dynamics are unfolding in Canada. The antiprivatization movement has been strong for decades, but a decidedly pro-public movement has yet to find its feet. There is no shortage of abstract ideas for what a postprivatization country might look like, but concrete proposals for alternative public services that go beyond tinkering with the status quo are few and far between.

All of this appears set to change, with a growing awareness among antiprivatization advocates of the need to emphasize alternatives, and an eagerness to learn from other parts of the world. This paper provides a critical but optimistic story about this Canadian potential. It is written out of deep respect for the thousands of people who have struggled to build and maintain public services in the past, but tempered with a recognition that protecting what we have is not always good enough. While many public services in Canada are well worth defending, we must not be nostalgic about public management models that have at times been exclusionary, opaque, and blindly productivist in their orientation.⁵

This paper begins with a brief review of ongoing privatization trends in Canada, informed by an expansive definition of what private sector engagement means in practice. Only by expanding our characterization of privatization can we fully appreciate how deeply it has penetrated services in the country, shedding light on both the necessity and the opportunities for reclaiming and rebuilding public service provision (and highlighting the need to go beyond public service models as they stand). This review is followed by a brief examination of the antiprivatization movement in Canada and its key actors. The paper then explores the fledging pro-public movement in the country, noting three particularly difficult obstacles that it will need to overcome: an inherently contested notion of what constitutes a good

public service; a reluctance to be overly critical of existing public services; and the lack of an established pro-public framework for research and advocacy. The paper concludes with highlights of pro-public movements elsewhere in the world, drawing lessons for what they may have to offer in the building of a more unified (and globalized) pro-public movement in Canada.

“Privatization” in Canada

The word “privatization” is in quotation marks here to underscore its contentious and complex meaning. Strictly speaking, privatization refers to instances where state-owned assets are divested, in their entirety, to a private company, along with management control and decisionmaking responsibilities (while regulation and monitoring remain the responsibility of government). Canada has witnessed extensive divestitures over the past 30 years, encompassing sectors as varied as transportation (for example, Air Canada and Canadian National Railway), energy (Petro-Canada and Nova Scotia Power) and telecommunications (Alberta Government Telephones and Manitoba Telephone Services).⁶

However, the vast majority of “privatization” in Canada has taken the form of public-private partnerships (P3s), particularly in essential services such as water and sanitation, health, electricity, and education. With P3s, private companies take on a prescribed set of managerial and asset responsibilities on a contractual basis over a set period of time. These contracts can range from a 12-month agreement for laundry services at a small hospital, up to a 25-year management concession for complete operational and asset control of water and sanitation services for an entire city. Although these contracts differ from sector to sector and place to place, they all constitute partnerships between a private, for-profit company and different levels of the state, with assets typically returning to public ownership and control at completion.⁷

Some analysts insist that P3s are not privatization.⁸ Strictly speaking, this is true, but P3s represent a fundamental shift of power and decisionmaking authority from public to private hands, particularly with long-term contracts, where the institutional capacity of public agencies dissipates over time, making it difficult to bring some services back in house, contributing to a *de facto* form of privatization. P3s also tend to usher in the same transformative processes of commodification and marketization of public goods and services, with private companies typically insisting on ring-fenced financial systems to monitor profits, and cost-recovery models that often marginalize broader societal goals such as equity, environmental sustainability, and worker health and safety.⁹

Tellingly, proponents of P3s never refer to them as privatization. This tactic can be seen as part of a discursive strategy to obscure the underlying objectives of private sector participation while avoiding the controversies associated with outright divestitures. With opinion polls regularly showing that the majority of Canadians are opposed to privatization in essential services,¹⁰ proprivatization advocates are keen to avoid the term, employing ambiguous technical language (such as “alternative financing mechanisms”) or feel-good terminology (such as “innovative”) that obscure underlying dynamics and make P3s difficult to reject out of hand.

Euphemisms aside, P3s are pervasive in Canada. Virtually every sector has been affected: childcare; prisons; liquor stores; early childhood education; environmental inspection; transit; waste management; snow removal; roads maintenance; parking; hospitals; health clinics; libraries; official development assistance; and many more. It is impossible to know exactly what percentage of services in Canada are now provided by private, for-profit firms—there is no central repository for tracking information, and contracts are constantly being renewed and cancelled—but it is safe to say that there is scarcely a service or location in the country that has not been affected by this phenomenon over the past three decades.¹¹

Moreover, Canada appears to be expanding its divestiture and P3 programs. Water, health care, education, electricity, and other essential services continue to experience a deepening of private sector investment, while new terrains of privatization are being opened up (for example, airports, sea ports, postal services, and alcohol).¹² There are also plans for a new federal infrastructure investment bank that will employ public funds to leverage private financing for major infrastructure investments.¹³

Less obvious, but equally problematic, are instances of “privatization” where services are owned and operated by the state but function as though they are private companies. These agencies (or parastatals) operate with a degree of autonomy from government, with separate legal status from other public service providers and with a corporate structure similar to publicly traded private companies. Water and electricity utilities are common examples, although the practice extends to a much wider range of goods and services, including airports; alcohol; child care; universities; forests; hospitals; transport; and manufacturing.¹⁴

Not all parastatal agencies are designed to be run like private companies, but the trend over the past 30 years has been to create “business units” in which managers are evaluated on the financial bottom line of the service they operate, with all costs and revenues accounted for as though it were a profit-making entity. Such ring-fencing is intended to create greater financial transparency, reduce political interference, and strengthen managerial accountability within relatively autonomous service entities, but it has also contributed to the building of market-friendly public sector cultures and ideologies: part of a larger neoliberal trend towards new public management, often with the express intent of outright privatization once the profit potential of a corporatized entity has been realized.¹⁵ In other words, corporatized services might be “public” in name, but not necessarily in character, raising questions about the substance and nature of state ownership and whether it should also be considered a *de facto* form of privatization.

Finally, there are forms of privatization in which public agencies themselves are the privatizers. In some cases, this involves one public utility buying up another (e.g. Hydro Quebec’s (failed) attempt to purchase New Brunswick Power in 2009), while others involve Canadian utilities privatizing public services elsewhere in the world. Manitoba Hydro is an example of the latter. While fighting attempts by the provincial government to privatize its services at home, Manitoba Hydro’s international wing signed a four-year contract in 2012 to privatize electricity transmission in Nigeria (with virtually no media coverage in Canada, despite its implementation of a privatization program that would be “illegal” in Manitoba, and much controversy in the host country).¹⁶

Even less well known are investments made by public pension funds in privatized services. One such example is the Ontario Teachers' Pension Fund's majority ownership of fully privatized water and sanitation services in Chile (initially divested during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet).¹⁷ In fact, Canadian public pension fund managers are considered world leaders in investing in public infrastructure as an asset class, and are often sought out as board members and advisors in this rapidly growing investment field (as illustrated by their disproportionate representation on the management board of the recently formed Global Infrastructure Investor Association—whose mandate it is to “Promote Private Investment in Infrastructure”—including the Ontario Teachers' Pension Fund, the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, *Caisse de Dépôt et Placement du Québec*, and the Public Sector Pension Investment Board, representing some \$870 billion in assets in 2016).¹⁸ Some public pension funds have even formed joint ventures with profit-seeking service providers, such as the *Caisse de Dépôt's* partnership with French water multinational Suez to purchase GE Water & Process Technologies.¹⁹

Some public sector unions have attempted to challenge the investment strategies of their pension funds, but aggressive countercampaigns by fund managers (and the fact that some pension funds have been effectively privatized and now operate independently from their members) make them difficult to modify. It is also true that union members are themselves divided on the question of privatization. Kerr characterizes such a split in the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation as a division between “bureaucratic business unionism” and “radical grassroots unionism”: the former being “concerned with growth of membership and formal standing with the rest of the labour movement, but is not opposed to privatization or corporate partnerships,” while the latter “favours not only affiliation with the labour movement but also broad-based public education alliances with parent groups and other teachers unions, and it is opposed to privatization and corporate sponsorships.”²⁰

In short, privatization is not only widespread in Canada it is often hidden in obscure and murky ways that prevent the average person from recognizing it as such, let alone understanding its implications. As a result, many Canadians hold onto a false conception of a country with deep-seated commitments to equitable public service delivery when, in reality, there has been a dramatic erosion of this model over time and a growing hegemony of policymaking in favour of private sector actors and market-oriented operating principles.

The antiprivatization movement in Canada

These trends have not gone unchallenged. There has been a strong and relatively unified antiprivatization voice in Canada since the 1980s, made up of unions, community associations, and nongovernmental organizations, with additional support from some elected officials, media representatives, and academics. Public sector unions have generally been in the vanguard, as the most organized and best funded of these organizations—e.g. Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW))—with some private sector unions lending support as well e.g. the United Food and Commercial Workers

union and the United Steelworkers union. NGOs such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the Council of Canadians, and the Polaris Institute have also played a key role, often in partnership with labour and community organizations, such as Friends of Public Services and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. On the political front, the New Democratic Party (NDP) is the only major political party that has been consistently critical of privatization in the country.

Antiprivatization voices can also be found in mainstream media, but they tend to be in the minority, focusing on high-profile cases in a few revered sectors (such as health care), and often take the form of opinion pieces. Sustained, in-depth reporting on the variety of ways in which the public sector is commercializing public services in Canada can be found only among a handful of committed journalists (such as Linda McQuaig) and a few small media outlets (such as rabble.ca).

For its part, academia in Canada remains split on the topic. Battle lines have been drawn and there is little in the way of shared methodologies or conceptual frameworks, limiting the potential of productive discourse between pro- and antiprivatization voices. Even where there is clear evidence of privatization's failures on mainstream economic grounds, proprivatization scholars tend to ignore these findings, widening the intellectual gulf.²¹

The challenges of building a pro-public movement in Canada

Such is the complex, uneven, and sometimes antagonistic terrain upon which a pro-public movement in Canada will have to be built. Opposition to certain forms of privatization might be strong, but it is unclear how, and if, Canadians are concerned about subtler forms of commercialization, how willing they are to engage critically with existing public service institutions, or what the most effective forms of organization might be.

In practice, there is no distinctly pro-public movement in the country. An extensive search by this author in mid-2017 found only a handful of Canadian organizations that have developed pro-public campaigns, but as inspiring as these initiatives are, they are effectively standalone projects, geographically isolated, largely sector-based, and have had limited success in attracting mainstream media attention. Examples include OPSEU's "We Own It" campaign (<https://opseu.org/topics/we-own-it>); the Council of Canadians's efforts to promote publicly owned and operated water systems (<https://canadians.org/bluecommunities>); CUPE-funded research on remunicipalization²²; the Canadian Health Coalition's "Pro-public Health Care" campaign (<http://www.healthcoalition.ca/propublic-health-care/>); and CUPW's drive for a national public banking system via the post office (<http://www.cupw.ca/en/campaigns-and-issues/postal-banking>).

Efforts to expand this fledgling movement will be difficult, requiring substantial institutional commitment, resources, and coordination. Finding common ground on what constitutes a "good" public service will be challenging, and potentially divisive), with different organizations having diverse ideological orientations and sectoral interests. Even within organizations, it might be a challenge to find a shared vision, with some public sector unions, such as CUPE, being highly decentralized and operating in multiple sectors, making it difficult to develop and organize a collective

message.²³ Building a unified pro-public movement could also run up against an unwillingness on the part of some organizations to be critical of existing public services, while the lack of an established pro-public analytical framework can make coordinated research and advocacy difficult. I discuss each of these challenges in more detail below, drawing, in part, on the broader international experience of pro-public movements to illustrate my points.

The inherent complexity of publicness

Explaining the pitfalls of privatization is relatively easy. They are consistent across place and sector and have been documented in Canada and around the world.²⁴ Millions of people have felt the effects of privatization directly, and others have been alerted to them through the media. It is a familiar story to many.

By contrast, no such easy narratives apply to the (re)making of public services. Organizational norms, cultural expectations and institutional capacities differ dramatically across place and sector, rendering any single notion of what constitutes a “good” public service impossible. Consumer expectations in rural Alberta may be very different from those in urban Quebec, and can change dramatically from health care to electricity. Some universal criteria might be acceptable to a broad coalition of progressive public service proponents (e.g. equity, transparency, and accountability), but how these criteria are interpreted and implemented can vary considerably. Unlike privatization, there is no clearly agreed-upon ideological or organizational blueprint for pro-public services.

It is not clear even what constitutes “public,” particularly in light of the rapid growth in participatory practices over the past 30 years, with community associations and NGOs having begun to play a much larger role in public service management and policymaking (e.g. participatory budgeting, citizen representation on municipal committees, etc.). Furthermore, after decades of austerity, states are no longer automatically associated with the public good; in some cases, they are seen as its antithesis. Consequently, the institutional boundaries of public provision have become increasingly blurred, producing radically different interpretations of who should be engaged in public service provision. This has resulted in an inherently tension-ridden discussion of any pro-public future.²⁵

A concrete example of these ideological and institutional tensions can be found in the water remunicipalization movement. Although generally lumped under the same conceptual rubric, remunicipalization is, in fact, the product of profoundly different philosophical impulses, with substantively different outcomes, in countries as diverse as France, Ghana, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Bolivia.²⁶ In some cases, remunicipalization is a result of “state capitalists” seeking control of key sectors of the economy for social, economic, and political reasons.²⁷ In others, it is social-democratic governments pushing for a more equitable distribution of resources within a market framework, or pragmatic bureaucrats simply looking for cost savings.²⁸ In yet other cases, it is a product of anticapitalist states and civil society movements searching for noncommodified forms of water delivery,²⁹ or anarchist/autonomist movements seeking alternative ways of delivering water that are controlled by neither the state nor corporate interests.³⁰ Some of these groups advocate for a robust and

interventionist state while others demand stronger “social control” of water services on the part of citizens.³¹

Not surprisingly, efforts to unite this eclectic set of actors under a single “pro-public” banner have met with mixed success, with little in the way of consensus within the remunicipalization movement itself as to what it is attempting to achieve. The remunicipalization movement has yet to take off in the Canadian context, but any collective demands to return to “public” control of essential services must acknowledge, engage with, and encourage differences of opinion on what we want to reclaim and what we may want to reject, rather than assuming a return to the status quo.

Public debate on the topic will not be easy. Journalists might be acquainted with antiprivatization narratives, but the reclamation of public services is often too complex and contradictory to lend itself to digestible soundbites, with most media outfits struggling to follow (and effectively convey) complex plot lines. Moreover, the rebuilding of public services can be extremely mundane, seldom offering up the same kind of explosive storylines as fights against privatization. Cochabamba, in Bolivia, is a good case in point. Having attracted widespread international media attention with its “water wars” against privatization in the early 2000s, there has been virtual media silence since, with the difficult (and largely unsuccessful to date) process of rebuilding a public water system barely registering on the global news radar screen. Calls by the Labour Party in the lead-up to 2017 national elections in the United Kingdom for the renationalization and remunicipalization of a wide range of privatized services did make front page coverage there; however, the topic remains relatively marginal in the press, even in Europe, where hundreds of towns and cities have remunicipalized water and electricity over the past 15 years. For its part, mainstream media in Canada has been silent on the topic, despite experiences with remunicipalization in different sectors in different parts of the country,³² not to mention more than 800 cases in other parts of the world.³³

A reluctance to be critical

A second challenge for building a pro-public movement in Canada might be an unwillingness on the part of some organizations to be (overly) critical of public services, with a defence of the status quo often being a default position in the fight against privatization. This is understandable in a country where welfare-era services have been relatively equitable and effective for the majority of Canadians (with notable exceptions for many indigenous and other marginalized and racialized groups³⁴), but a defence of the status quo can lead to complacency and perhaps even resistance to change. As a result, some of the stiffest opposition to “new” forms of public services may come from organizations protecting “old” service delivery models.

By contrast, in countries where welfare-era systems did not previously exist or were so heavily biased towards elite and corporate interests as to deny them widespread popular support, pro-public movements have been much more willing to be critical of the status quo. In such cases it might be easier to find vocal opposition to existing public services from unions, NGOs, community organizations, and other pro-public advocates, with stronger appetites and deeper demands for radical public

service reforms. Indeed, countries with poor public service records are often the most vocal in this regard, leading the way with creative and energetic expressions of public service demands and innovative forms of public service experimentation.³⁵ In this respect, Canada's relatively good experience with public services (and the often veiled ways in which public services are commercialized) could make it more difficult to drum up the broad-based, multistakeholder support required for radical overhauls to some public service models.

There is also a possibility that being too critical of existing public services could lend support to those in favour of privatization ("Look, even proponents of public services don't like them!"). But defending public services merely because they are owned and operated by the state does little to advance their outcomes and effectiveness, particularly those run on private sector operating principles such as corporatized business units. Moreover, if transparency and open debate are values we want to promote in public services in the future, pro-public campaigns must be clear about their critiques of public services.

A related concern might be that shifting attention to the reform of public services could send out the (incorrect) signal that privatization is no longer a threat, possibly drawing resources and attention away from important antiprivatization struggles. On this point, I would argue that simultaneous campaigns on both fronts are necessary and unavoidable, with a good pro-public offense benefitting from and complementing an equally important antiprivatization defence. These contemporaneous objectives will be particularly important for unions in Canada, given their need to fight the bread-and-butter battles of privatization on behalf of their members while, at the same time, attempting to set a new agenda for public service alternatives that could help to mitigate privatization pressures in the future. But fighting two campaigns concurrently will not be easy. Indeed, it may be seen as a luxury by some unions, with limited energy and resources needed for the more immediate crises of privatization.

In this respect, an effective, sustainable pro-public movement will require a broad-based coalition of organizations with different mandates beyond those of the labour movement. Community organizations and NGOs will be particularly important, in part because they have fewer political constraints when it comes to being critical of the status quo and are often more willing to propose alternative models of public delivery. However, these groups also tend to have fewer resources, and competing objectives could put communities and NGOs at odds with unions, making it difficult to construct and sustain labour-community alliances. The fact that so few such coalitions exist in Canada is perhaps indicative of this challenge, but they are not without promise or precedence, as illustrated by a handful of success stories in Canada and elsewhere.

Having pro-public movements that emerge out of antiprivatization campaigns in Canada is therefore both a blessing and a curse. It can help draw on existing networks of people and organizations that have achieved success in challenging for-profit service delivery, but, at the same time, act as a check on forward movement, exposing tensions around how public service alternatives might be (re)constituted and fragmenting the messages that might emerge from these coalitions.

Academia

And what of academics? Scholars have been active in the antiprivatization debate in Canada and elsewhere for decades, but have been remarkably quiet when it comes to spelling out concrete pro-public alternatives beyond abstract principles. Antineoliberal and anticapitalist rhetoric abounds, but these theoretical frameworks are seldom accompanied by tangible proposals for what a pro-public postprivatization framework might look like. There are no dedicated journals on the topic, and while panels and papers about the problems of privatization proliferate, pro-public debates rarely feature as standalone themes in academic publications or conferences.

An international literature on the topic is emerging, but here too it tends to be scattered in its origins and deeply inconsistent in its methodologies and theoretical structures.³⁶ Much of the research, often conducted by NGOs, seldom finds its way into academic venues. As a result, rigorous studies on pro-public movements are difficult to find and even harder to compare and evaluate, particularly across sectors. In fact, it might be the sectoral divide that most starkly separates the pro-public literature, with research on water alternatives largely contained to water journals, health in health journals, electricity in energy journals, and so on. There is remarkably little crosssectoral referencing. Pro-public water scholars in India are more likely to be familiar with what is happening with water in Mexico or France than they are with public service reforms in health, electricity, or waste management in their own country.

Finally, many academics—myself included—feel uneasy about imposing one's ideas on another person's service delivery system. Telling people what is wrong with privatization is one thing. Suggesting an alternative public service delivery is quite another, even when that alternative has been developed in consultation with local stakeholders. This epistemological debate aside, it is critical for academics to work closely with unions, community groups, and other grassroots organizations to develop pro-public research agendas and to work towards alternatives in as collaborative a manner as possible. Fortunately, there is a rich tradition of such scholar-activism in Canada, which could transfer over to a pro-public research agenda.³⁷

Lessons from elsewhere

As difficult as it may be to move from antiprivatization to pro-public positioning in Canada, experience elsewhere in the world proves that it is possible, even in the face of deep-seated ideological and institutional differences within a pro-public movement. In fact, one of the most important lessons to be drawn from international experience is the importance of embracing difference rather than rejecting or avoiding it, with heterogeneity acting as a catalyst for knowledge-sharing and serving as a platform for shaking up conventional wisdoms. Such ideological variation is not always fully acknowledged by pro-public movements, but, in many cases, has contributed to vigorous debates, dynamic engagement, and innovative experimentation.

Organizing around the concept of “energy democracy” is one such example. Coalition building on this topic has exploded over the past five years, despite—or because of—radical differences of opinion about what constitutes a democratic public

electricity system. These opinions range from large national utilities to decentralized community-run services with a variety of different infrastructures and governance frameworks (see, for example, the websites of unionsforenergydemocracy.org; energydemocracy.com.au; energydemocracyny.org; and allianceforenergydemocracy.org). Broad coalitions will not, in and of themselves, ensure robust conversation or resolve philosophical tensions, but they can propagate new ideas and contribute to the building of unexpected pro-public alliances, helping to transcend the sometimes stale *status quo ante* divisions of the welfare era.

Canada's political topography is less variegated than that of many countries where such pro-public debates are flourishing—countries such as France, Spain, and Bolivia, with strong socialist, anarchist, and other radical traditions. Perhaps the scope of debate is narrower, but there are still sufficiently broad ideological differences in Canada to support important discussions about key questions of public service reform, such as equitable pricing, bureaucratic accountability, and environmental justice. There are also uniquely Canadian debates about public services that will require a broadening of the political imagination, such as calls for a re-indigenization of water services.³⁸

Another lesson to be learned from the international pro-public experience is that of the importance of citizen engagement (as opposed to governments or unions driving change). Top-down efforts to remake public services have been successful, and even progressive, in some places, as with the remunicipalization of water in Paris.³⁹ But bottom-up mobilizations have been a critical part of building and sustaining many pro-public movements, even if the nature of these grassroots initiatives differs from place to place. In Spain, for example, elections of Left-leaning governments in 2015 to 2016 led to a rapid change in public awareness of, and attitudes towards, remunicipalization. Community organizations have often taken the lead (in collaboration with unions) in demanding a return of services to public hands and initiating a vigorous national debate about how these republicitized services should be run.⁴⁰ In Germany, by contrast, the shift in public consciousness and public mobilization has been much slower, taking decades to build, but it is now one of the most vibrant pro-public movements in the world. Twenty-five years ago the privatization of services was accepted broadly by the public, but “since then there has been a conspicuous shift in public values,” with media discourse on privatization becoming “more skeptical.” Today, surveys in Germany indicate “a clear popular preference for public provision of more or less all forms of technical infrastructure.”⁴¹ These grassroots demands have also led to a radical rethinking of technological choices, resulting in a phasing out of nuclear power and a dramatic increase in public investments in renewable energy.⁴²

Some countries have used referenda to raise public awareness and create a pro-public movement. A 2004 national referendum in Uruguay introduced an amendment to its Constitution outlawing water privatization. It contributed to both a significant reorganization of public water provision and to a growing pride among citizens of their public water providers.⁴³ In Italy, a 2011 national referendum saw the repeal of two controversial pieces of legislation that had imposed compulsory competitive tendering on water services and set mandatory returns on investments for water companies. These Acts were defeated by a massive margin of 95 percent, creating

widespread awareness not only of the pitfalls of privatization but also of opportunities for reimagining how public water could be provided.⁴⁴ In Colombia in 2009, more than two million people signed a petition demanding a similar referendum on water commodification. Although nullified by the state before it could be implemented, the process served to raise awareness among citizens about the potential for public service reform, contributing to the development of a healthy pro-public movement in the country.⁴⁵

Labour-community-NGO coalitions have been another effective way of expanding public awareness of, and generating support for, a pro-public movement. One example is the European Public Service Unions' (EPSU) campaign on energy democracy, which has worked in concert with NGOs and community organizations across the European Union and has been successful in raising awareness of how changes to public energy provision can be improved to address energy poverty, renewables, and more democratic decisionmaking.⁴⁶ An alliance of community associations and municipal unions in rural Colombia is another example, in this case developing autonomous water systems in rural parts of the country that do not involve any form of state engagement.⁴⁷

Conclusions

None of these examples are quick-fix solutions to the challenge of building effective pro-public movements in Canada, and, in this regard, perhaps the most important international lesson is that of patience. Reversing three decades of institutionalized privatization and creeping commercialization in Canada will not happen overnight. Deep-seated neoliberal ideological and institutional biases will persist, stifling efforts to build coalitions and develop new forms of messaging. Even Germany's much-celebrated shift back to public control of essential services remains constrained. Despite having radically altered the sources and ownership of public services systems, the:

Emphasis on commercial enterprises and business practices remains much stronger than in the 1960s and 1970s... Thus, it should be interpreted as a partial rebalancing rather than a fundamental rollback of market reforms. The pendulum might have swung back, but the pendulum has halted far from its original position.⁴⁸

Then again, the objective of a pro-public movement is not getting back to an "original position." Innovative public service models must take into account new environmental concerns, an increasingly diverse demographic, and the need to shed our public service systems of their corporatist leanings. In this respect, there is no end-date for completion and no perfect public model. Democratic public services are, by definition, under constant review and modification, responding to shifting needs and changing forms of democratic engagement.

Canada is a relative latecomer to these debates, but there are exciting opportunities for discussion and an urgent need to develop alternative visions for a public service future, particularly in light of what appears to be a new wave of privatization initiatives in the country. I would argue that any such pro-public coalition should be pan-Canadian in its organization and multisectoral in its focus, and include a range

of community groups, unions, NGOs, scholars, and progressive government officials. It should acknowledge and respect the diverse and contradictory ways in which public services are being (re)built in different places and sectors, and attempt to learn from this terrain of difference. Factionalism has long been the scourge of the Left. It should not be allowed to conquer a pro-public movement before it gets off the ground.

A Canadian movement should also engage with similar movements elsewhere in the world in an effort to learn if and how those experiences might be transferred to the Canadian context. None of this will happen quickly, or easily, but it is never too early to start.

Notes

1. See Dower and Markevich, "A History of Resistance," 855–73; Kingstone et al., "Resistance to Privatization," 93–116; Robinson, *Contested Water*; Sarker, "Neoliberal State," 416–40.
2. Graham et al., "Water Wars," 115–41; Kalen-Sukra, "Beating the Corporate Campaign," 4–7; Kingsnorth, *One No, Many Yeses*; Loomis, "The Global Water Crisis," 189–95.
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