

# Bill 44 disrespects Manitoba consumers

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EVERY Manitoban who uses electricity and drives a vehicle will be affected by Bill 44, because it undermines our right to question the rates we pay to two important monopolies — Manitoba Hydro and Manitoba Public Insurance. It is a step backward for consumer rights in our province.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone is preoccupied with such pressing issues as the health of their family and the security of their jobs, the Pallister government quietly asked for public comments about Bill 44 via its website, with a quick closing date. This is the opposite of meaningful public consultation and input.

On behalf of consumers across Manitoba, we have looked more deeply at Bill 44 and submitted a brief to the government, which includes the following three key areas of concern.

First, that we are losing independent, non-governmental, third-party oversight of large monopolies in Manitoba's marketplace. It is widely accepted that consumers' right to access affordable, basic, essential goods and services, and to have choices among a variety of goods and services in the marketplace, is essential.

In Manitoba, we rely on the independent oversight of the Public Utilities Board to set rates and examine the business practices at both Manitoba Hydro and MPI. The PUB maintains a delicate balance between the interests of monopoly corporations and ratepayers by improving accessibility and consumer protections.

This oversight by the PUB has served Manitobans well. The board has consistently helped to slow Manitoba Hydro rate hikes over a number of years, based on careful examination and questioning of the utility's business plans. This has saved consumers significant sums on their monthly energy bills; for example, in 2018, the PUB reduced a proposed 7.9 per cent Manitoba Hydro rate increase to 3.6 per cent, saving Manitoba ratepayers more than \$60 million annually.

**We urged the PUB to provide consumers with an Autopac rate rebate, which the government then announced on April 23. Bill 44 specifically eliminates MPI rebates for drivers.**

In May 2011, MPI was ordered to issue an unprecedented rebate of 45 per cent to all policyholders, an average of \$450 for every Manitoba driver. The PUB had discovered that MPI had \$200 million more in its hands than it required for its personal-injury protection plan and, between 2001 and 2016, ordered rebates of nearly \$600 million to Manitoba drivers.

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Our second concern is about transparency and access to information for all interests in the marketplace. Consumers have the right to information about goods and services, including the impact of the production of those goods and services on communities and the environment. The PUB process helps get information out to the public regarding electricity, natural gas, auto insurance, payday lending and energy efficiency programs that would otherwise be very difficult for consumers to access.

Third, the public needs the opportunity to provide meaningful input. By stripping the PUB of much of its authority and many public processes, Bill 44 takes away our right, as Manitobans of all interests, to question government monopolies and to have a meaningful voice in making decisions for the marketplace. While we may not agree with every PUB decision, we have confidence in the evidence-based process.

For these reasons, we strongly urge the province to recall Bill 44. If the government wishes to consider reforms or revision of the PUB, legislation should be the last step in that process, not the first. Meaningful public and stakeholder engagement must begin before decisions have been made, when alternatives are still being discussed.

It should include both remote and in-person opportunities for input, must be widely advertised, and should never take place during a state of emergency, when Manitobans are occupied with other unprecedented concerns.

*Gloria Desorcy is executive director of the Consumers' Association of Canada (Manitoba).*