SAVING SASKATCHEWAN LIBRARIES

CASE STUDY: "WE'RE NOT AFRAID TO ADMIT WE MADE A MISTAKE"

Political engagement can take on many forms and often involves finding common interests across different groups. Consider this as you read the following case study about how citizens of Saskatchewan convinced the government to reverse a funding cut to the public library system.

The Background

In April 2016, the Saskatchewan Party was re-elected into government with an overwhelming 62% of the vote. Their re-election platform talked about "Growth to Build a Better Quality of Life" and "Growing Active and Vibrant Communities."

However, facing a collapse in commodity prices, the 2017 provincial budget increased taxes and cut funding for many public services.

One cut was a $4.8 million reduction to library funding. The operating grant for rural libraries was reduced from $6 million to $2.5 million, and the $1.3 million operating grant for the Saskatoon and Regina public libraries was entirely eliminated. The cuts were announced without consultation.

The Minister of Education Don Morgan defended the cuts several ways, including:

- library circulation had dropped by 1.6 million items since 2007
- the number of library cards were down by 175,000
- many small towns already have school libraries, so why would they need a separate public library?

The Libraries React

The Saskatchewan Library Association (SLA) warned that the cuts would devastate the library system. Staff would be laid off, programs would be eliminated, and interlibrary loans would be axed.

They countered that the minister's arguments showed a limited understanding of what happens at public libraries:

- even though resource circulation was dropping, library use was increasing: for example, Saskatoon had a 30% increase in program attendance and a 10% increase in wireless internet and desktop computer use in 2015 alone
- cards were a poor measure of library use: families often had one card for their entire family; institutions like seniors' homes often had a single card to serve dozens of members; and a new integrated card system in 2015 eliminated many duplicate cards
- combining school libraries with public libraries would be costly and difficult, given the many ways they serve very different purposes

The SLA encouraged people to contact their MLA and ask that the cuts be reversed.

The Public Reacts

Immediately, people went online to voice their concern. A Facebook group Save Saskatchewan Libraries popped up, soon boasting over 7,000 members. Meanwhile, a website **www.savesasklibraries.ca** appeared along with a **#saveSKlibraries** hashtag.

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Christine Freethy, one of the founders and administrators of the Save Saskatchewan Libraries Facebook group, told the *Library Journal* that it was important that the group be non-partisan:

> *We had a strategy of being officially non-partisan... We were able to attract a lot of people to our movement who voted for [the Saskatchewan Party] in the last election, a lot of rural people who their base is, by being officially non-partisan and pretty much staying pretty clean. Not that we weren't critical of the government, but we didn't let anything get too crazy or too much political rhetoric. We kept it really accessible.*[1]

They focussed on one thing: restoring library funding.

Meanwhile, a petition began to circulate across the province. It was created in accordance with *The Referendum and Plebiscite Act*, and demanded a province-wide vote on the cuts. Over 32,000 people signed it before the effort was withdrawn. As well, draft letters were created to help people write their own letter to their MLA about the cuts.

People, however, did not just go online, write letters, or sign petitions to voice their displeasure. Public demonstrations were a key element. The first protest happened on March 25th, organised by the labour union representing employees at the Regina Public Library. The most visible action, though, was the province-wide DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) rallies. The idea was simple. On April 7th, people would show up outside their MLA's office or library and read for 15 minutes. Leslie Richards, who thought of DEAR, told the CBC that "there are so many people that are upset and outraged by this... the goal is to rally them together in a peaceful manner."

Grassroots organisation for DEAR began in countless communities. When the day arrived, it was one of the biggest protests in Saskatchewan's history. More than 100 people showed up in Yorkton, 50 in Shellbrook, 200 in Swift Current, 65 in Lumsden, 150 in Estevan, 40 in Fox Valley, and so on... In total an estimated 6,500 people came out in over 70 communities to show their support for public libraries and demand the funding cut be rescinded. For many people, it was their first time taking part in a protest. For some towns, it was the first time a protest had ever taken place in their community.

The letters, petitions, social media posts, and protests were working. A poll conducted from April 11th - 13th showed that support for the ruling Saskatchewan Party had plummeted almost 20 points from the election, down to 44%. The NDP polled at 40%, and the Progressive Conservatives—the all-but-dead predecessor of the Saskatchewan Party—were at a distant but noticeable 7%. To be sure, the library protests were not the only thing hurting the government's popularity but there can be no doubt of the library supporters' impact on public opinion.

The Government Reconsiders

The government recognised how deeply the public was opposed to the budget in general, and the cuts to libraries in particular. On April 24th the government reversed the cuts to library funding.

When announcing the funding restoration, Minister Morgan told reporters:

> *We're not afraid to admit we made a mistake on something.... We've heard from people pretty clearly that they value the library in its present form. It's important for them not just to have the electronic capability, but they also want to have the physical space to go to.*[2]

The collective effort of thousands of citizens had worked, proving the importance of political engagement.

Discuss

1. Minister Morgan told the *Library Journal* that there was "no doubt" that the protests had a role in the governing party's change of heart. He congratulated the protesters for their "peaceful and respectful" behaviour.

   Studies have shown that peaceful protests are more likely to gain broad public support than violent protests. Why would peaceful protest be more effective?

2. The campaign to restore library funding took place on several fronts. This included social media, letter-writing, petitions, rallies, and letters to local media. What does this tell us about the importance of engaging in politics on multiple fronts?

3. The protest organisers worked hard to avoid inflammatory partisan rhetoric. Do you think this helped their cause? Why or why not?

1. "Public Outcry Saves Saskatchewan Library Funds," Bob Warburton, *Library Journal*, May 15, 2017. www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=public-outcry-saves-saskatchewan-library-funds.

2. "'We made a mistake': Sask. government turns back page on library cuts," Stephanie Langenegger, CBC News, April 24, 2017. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/sask-libraries-budget-reversal-1.4082965.

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