

Interview with Heather McPherson M.P. Edmonton Strathcona (2024-05-04 11:04 GMT-6) - Transcript

Attendees

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Transcript

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Robert Ascah: In this exclusive interview, I speak with MP4 Edmonton Strathcona Heather McPherson about the introduction and background of Bill C- 387 an amendment to the *Canada Pension Plan Act*.

By way of background, in September 2023, the Government of Alberta released report prepared by actuarial firm Lifeworks, formerly Morneau Shepell, whose findings purported to claim over 50 per cent of the CPP's assets under the formula for asset withdrawal until the CPP Act. At the time of the report's release, the Government announced the formation of an engagement panel led by the former provincial Treasurer Jim Dinning.

This proposal arising directly by the Fair Deal Panel report in 2020 appointed by former premier Jason Kenney. This idea is a centrepiece of Alberta sovereigntists and goes back to ideas of the Western Canada Concept Party in the 1980s and the so-called firewall letter signed by Stephen Harper and Ted Morton in 2000. This action has become very controversial and public support for the plan is limited.

This past Tuesday Ms. McPherson tabled her short one-page bill to give other provinces a say in whether another province can withdraw from this national plan.

Welcome Heather- it's a real delight to speak with you today.

Heather McPherson: Thanks for having me on Bob. Nice to see you.

Robert Ascah: What made you decide to introduce an amendment to the CPP Act?

Heather McPherson: For me, this has been one of the issues that we've heard most about from our constituents. So, we speak to people on the doorsteps when we go door knocking. Just recently we did a series of meetings and senior residents and the issue that we were hearing over and over about was the CPP and the worry that so many people in Edmonton Strathcona had that Danielle Smith was going to take Alberta out of the CPP.

Prior to the May provincial election Danielle Smith had said "don't worry. I won't touch your pensions" and then it's very clear that that wasn't true that that wasn't actually accurate- that she was coming after our pensions. So as a federal politician as an Albertan, as a representative, and also as somebody who has senior parents that are dependent on the CPP and my team and I worked together to see what could we put in place that could at least limit Danielle Smith's ability to take Alberta out of the CPP.

Robert Ascah: Heather, what kind of consultation did you do before introducing a bill?

Heather McPherson: We talked to a whole bunch of people. Like I just mentioned we spoke to a ton of constituents. We also heard from people from across Alberta. So, there's lots of those kinds of conversations people that were worried people that wanted to know what we could do people that were actually quite shocked to find out that Alberta could unilaterally choose to leave the CPP. I think a lot of Albertans didn't realize that that was part of the legislation. We spoke to our colleagues in the Alberta NDP. We spoke to folks from the Alberta Federation of Labor. I know they've been working very hard on this and we spoke to Public Interest Alberta folks that are concerned about what Danielle Smith could potentially do and then we spoke to experts. We spoke to economists. We spoke to folks that know what the CPP legislation is. We worked with the legal experts at the House of Commons and the Parliamentary lawyers that help draft private members' bills on what's possible and what wouldn't be possible. So we had a pretty thorough consultation process on it.

Robert Ascah: What do you think the chances are of passage in the Commons and the Senate? And just to supplement that a little bit Heather- have you talked to cabinet minister Randy Boissonnault and I have you got a feel for whether the Liberals would support this kind of change.

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Heather McPherson: So, there's two things. First of all, in terms of being able to bring it forward within Parliament, the opportunity for that is very limited and it's only because some of your listeners probably don't know but the way private members business is done within the House of Commons is based on a lottery system. So, at the beginning of each Parliament, every member of Parliament's name is put in the Hat those numbers are drawn out, the first person goes first, second, and so on so not all members of Parliament are able to bring forward legislation within a Parliament. And of course, as a minority Parliament, we're not even sure how long this Parliament is sitting. It has sat longer than any other minority Parliament so far because of some of the agreements that the NDP have with the Liberals.

But for the most part we could have an election, at any time. So, it's very unlikely that this Parliament will be long lived enough for me to be able to bring it forward as a PMB. Head I have I sent it to Chrystia Freeland. I've highlighted why I think this is important and it brings up something else.

We're looking at this as something that Danielle Smith could potentially take Alberta out and there could be a number of reasons we can get into, about why she may want to do that. But I think there's a bigger concern that a lot of Canadians need to understand and that is that a conservative government may want Alberta to leave and Saskatchewan to leave and then perhaps Ontario to leave because we know Piere Poilievre since high school has been saying he does not support the CPP. He does not see it as something that workers have earned, he sees this as a tax on business. So really the risk to the CPP with what looks like if the polls are correct at this point a potential conservative government under a far-right ideologue Poilievre is where we really have some danger. So, I'm going to continue to push the government to bring forward this legislation.

It's (Bill C-387) simple, it's easy. They can get it passed- it would go through the No problem. They would have the support of the NDP. It would be able to get through the Senate. That's the path that we could fix the CPP to make sure that it's safe for generations to come....

Robert Ascah: What you're saying about Mr. Poilievre - to my understanding at least has demurred or not supported the Smith initiative. So you're suggesting that he might pull a Danielle Smith and not talk about

it and decide to if he gets a majority government make changes that would facilitate Alberta's exit and those of other provinces.

Heather McPherson: Let's be clear. I mean Danielle Smith said very clearly. She wouldn't touch Albertans pensions and is currently looking at how to touch Albertans pensions. I don't trust that Pierre Poilievre wouldn't do the exact same thing. And I also think it's important to note that it doesn't require him to do anything except say yes to Daniel Smith wanting to pull out and we have a conservative government in Saskatchewan. I mean if anything we see Scott Moe and Danielle Smith working in lockstep often on their attacks with the federal government, so I could see Saskatchewan leaving. You start to get two three provinces leaving the CPP and it's not the CPP anymore. It's the performing large pension plan that we have that protects Canadians so they can have a dignified retirement and then, all of a sudden, it's gone and Pierre Poilievre has made it clear throughout, he was part of Harper's government when they cut supports for seniors. He was part of Harper's government when they moved the OAS age eligibility even as recent is during his leadership race his comments on the desire to get rid of some of these supports for seniors has been very clear. So I don't think Canadians trust them. I don't trust him on a number of things but on this particular one I can do something to make it much harder for him to dismantle a pretty important institution in our country.

Robert Ascah: We've kind of talked around your actual bill. It's essentially one page Heather. Can you tell me what it does? So basically, what does the bill do?

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Heather McPherson: Right now, the legislation says that if a province wants to leave the CPP, they can with approval of the federal Minister. That's all that's required. Now of course, there'd be implications on every Canadian who accesses the CPP, but they would have no say in this, so this gives power back to the provinces, back to Canadians. So, there would need to be two-thirds support for any province to leave. So, two thirds of the Canadians, two-thirds of the provinces. So of course, what it does is it raises the bar. It says that the folks that are going to be impacted and Prince Edward Island or Ontario or British Columbia will also have a say in what happens with the other thing to note too is throughout the Pension Act, the threshold that is in place for all other decisions all other changes that want to be made is there needs to be two-thirds support. So, this was in fact the only part of the bill that didn't have that two-thirds threshold. So frankly when we looked at it, it just made sense to turn the thresholds to two thirds for this as well. It makes it so that you get a rogue Premier like Danielle Smith who sees dollar bills when she looks at the CPP and thinks that she can take that money and run, this protects from that and you do need to get the support of more Canadians and It's frankly giving power back to the provinces to manage the CPP.

Robert Ascah: Just to go back briefly to consultation. Have you reached out to any members of the Senate -Paula Simons I'm thinking of -that might want to introduce a similar Bill in the Senate with that speed things up?

Heather McPherson: We haven't done that yet, and it's a good idea and **certainly** will. Like you said I just tabled it on Tuesday. So, we wanted to make sure we got that in and I wanted to make sure that the government had it first because that's the fastest route and the last bit of time we have if the next election does end up with a Conservative government. It's October 2025. So, it feels like a lot of time but when it comes to legislation, that's not a lot of time. We do have to move quite rapidly if we do want to get this put into place. And so we're going to have a bit of a campaign to get folks to reach out to the Liberal

government and urge them to move on this legislation and to fix this the *Canada Pension Plan Act*, but it was a great idea to continue to also work with the Senate because one of the things I've learned about in Ottawa you have to be making friends in all the different places and have everybody pushing in one direction to get things through.

Robert Ascah: Now as you know legislation that's passed can be undone by succeeding governments and I think our sophisticated leaders or listeners know that. So I'd like to talk about related section a that's the controversial section 113 which sets out the transfer of Assets in the formula for determining the division of assets that's between the provinces and the departing Province Alberta's Lifeworks As I said earlier came up with a number of 52% or 53 percent of the assets. Did you have any discussions, or did you think about section 113 and whether that should be amended?

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Heather McPherson: We did and we went through the legislation and sometimes when you have these complex legislate pieces of legislation, there are a lot of things that you can fix or tighten up or to improve upon. This one was complicated and for us we wanted to get something that was clear that was easy for folks to understand that couldn't be weaponized the same way by the Conservatives. So, for us the answer that it was just a little bit more complicated than we wanted to get into for this one. I think updating the Pension Act thoroughly is something that needs to be done through the government like that, to do some of these things that need to be done through the government not through private members legislation.

Robert Ascah: So back to Danielle Smith and her sovereigntist agenda. How committed do you think the Smith government is to take control of whatever the chief actuary determines is the share for the province?

Heather McPherson: I don't know. I can't speak for Premier Smith but I will say I have very little faith that the reason she would want her hands on those dollars is to make a secure retirement plan for Albertans. My worry of course is that this is to cater to the far-right segment of the party that is controlling the agenda and controlling the narrative right now. We have heard that she has plans to invest this into the oil and gas sector which, I think for a lot of Albertans investing in a sector that just the nature of the climate crisis means cannot continue to grow. It's just impossible to expect that that will be the case. We've already seen the sectors changing and the impacts that's had on workers. I think the idea of her taking that money and investing it and things like that is very dangerous.

This government has been so chaotic, they flip-flopped on policies. They've introduced things that are deeply unpopular to the majority of Albertans. Danielle Smith doesn't seem to have a good sense of the direction she's going on it feels like she's all over the map. So, I certainly don't want a government like that in charge of our pension. It's far too risky to leave something like this in her hand. And the other piece too is that we know pensions work better when they're bigger. That's just how it works. But also, the fact is that the CPP is a good pension -it is set up to be- it is a strong performer. It is got the funds required to be supporting Canadians for decades to come. This is a strong pension that absolutely we can fix there's things that are in there that need to be tightened up. One of the issues for me is whether or not we're investing in forced labor and in certain areas of the world, but all of that to say this is an extraordinarily strong pension. There's not a reason in the world to take Alberta out of a pension so that Danielle Smith can have those dollars and potentially have less for Albertans.

We talk about this as Alberta has paid so much into the pension. We have to remember historically other provinces have also paid in more into the pension, you know Ontario has complained about the pension in the past because they felt they were supporting provinces like Alberta. This is what it means to be part of a country and I think that's why for many Canadians, for so many Albertans they're upset about the idea of Danielle Smith getting your hands on this money.

Robert Ascah: You raise the question about whether the investment funds, if obtained by the Alberta Government would be used for example to favor the fossil fuel sector and Quebec has a model where there's a dual mandate for the Caisse de Depot - economic Development and then a sound pension fund and their returns have not been quite as good as the CPP. They pay a slightly higher premium part of that demographics. but I want to come back to the whole government meddling with pensions and potentially have less for Albertans and democracy and will actions and we saw the Kenney government make significant changes teachers' pensions as you know and enhancing the amount of assets that AIMCo was managing. I could never quite figure out why all the sudden this idea came up. It wasn't in the UCP *Strong and Free* program.

And as you mentioned before Danielle Smith running to not touch pensions. So my final question to you is that the strength of the Canada Pension Plan Heather is the independence from political interference or political influence. I'm wondering if you had thought about in your Amendment Act to -not only there's a requirement that an exiting province have a comprehensive plan which is basically identical to the CPP and benefits and contribution structures. Had you thought about whether that an exit would require in effect the Investments to be managed by an arms-length board with no political interference?

Heather McPherson:

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Heather McPherson: So, when we spoke to the folks, the legal experts within the House of Commons when we spoke to them about what was possible. That was a question that we don't think that if Alberta was to take their money out of the CPP. There were limits on what we would be able to impose upon Alberta as a separate pension plan. We had so I'm not positive it was even possible to do that and... but again, What I found in my limited Parliamentary career is that the best private members bills are those ones that are very simple that are Private members bills don't get a lot of debate. We don't get a lot of time there. These are not like the big bills the government brings forward. These are ones that are small, focused bills. And so for us it was trying to figure out a way to do that. That was clear that was understandable. So if it does come for a vote within the House of Commons all the members of Parliament will understand what we're doing and why we're doing it and it can't be sort of Twisted, one of the things that we're seeing right now in the House of Commons is just incredible this information that's coming out and... I'm going to be really frank. It's almost a hundred percent coming from the Conservative Party of Canada where misinformation is there so if they could see this as a way that the federal government was trying to for Alberta to be woke or some sort of bizarre language that they use non-stop - wacko, language that they use non-stop in the house. And I think that would weaken the bill is it gives more power to Canadians more power to the provinces. So, for us that was a clear statement we could make, that was something that was much harder for them to push back against which I think is important right now.

I mean, it's a sad state of affairs that this is what we have to do when we consider how we write legislation. but it is not business usual in the house right now.

Robert Ascah: That's helpful to know that Heather and: the final question then is about the media has there been a little bit of a buzz. Have you had inquiries from the mainstream media on your bill?

Heather McPherson: I mean private members bills are, as you can imagine, not always the things that gets the most media this afternoon. I'm on some local television programming. We've had a number of articles written about it. So, there's been some media attention on it. And I think as we get more support for the government to move even a potential other Member of Parliament to take this bill on this doesn't have to be the Heather McPherson CPP bill. This can be anything that gets this legislation through I mean, that's our goal here.

Robert Ascah: This has been very pleasant, and I want to thank you very much for your time taking away from us busy schedule.

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Heather McPherson: Always such a pleasure to talk to you Thanks for all.

Meeting ended after 00:23:16 🙌