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RESEARCH PAPER



# Politics, transportation, and the people's health: a socio-political autopsy of the demise of a 70-year-old bus company

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## ABSTRACT

In May 2017, the Saskatchewan Transportation Company (STC), a 70-year-old bus company in Saskatchewan, Canada, was shut down through an austerity budget that saw several cuts. The government justified its decision on budgetary grounds although opponents cited possible negative impacts of the decision. A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) was employed to examine discourses used by different actors to explain the closure and the implications of these discourses for health and health equity. Data from 47 days of parliamentary debates, 751 newspaper articles, and 2 focus group discussions were imported into NVivo software for analysis. Discourses and counter-discourses surrounding the closure were explored and interpreted in the broader context of austerity and the politics of health. The evidence suggests that the closure of STC was facilitated by several contextual factors anchored around discourses of economic rationalization, minimization, government discretion, and the representation of the bus as a relic of a socialist past. Opponents of the closure defended the bus on the grounds of its utility and the possibility of marginalization/victimization of former bus users. A democratic and an evidence deficit as well as secondary discourses of human rights and environmental/climate impacts were used to argue against the STC closure. The research reveals the critical role of power in the creation of health inequities through austerity measures, particularly through discourses that negate the existence and associated rights of vulnerable users of public services such as public transportation.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Transportation; health equity; austerity

## Background

In May 2017, the Saskatchewan Transportation Company (STC), a crown corporation established in 1946 was abruptly closed by the Saskatchewan government as part of an austerity budget. The company was a vital mobility link for the province's sparsely distributed population. At the time of closure, the company had a fleet of 41 buses and covered 25 routes, connecting about 253 communities and travelling about 2.8 million miles per year (Saskatchewan Transportation Company, 2017). The bus closure was announced as part of the province's March 2017 budget that saw the implementation of several austerity measures including cuts to libraries and post-secondary institutions although some cuts were reversed following public outcry.

The government argued the closure would reduce the province's budget deficit, that intercity bus services were declining provincially and nationwide, and that the private sector would step in to fill

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed [here](#).

service gaps (Johnson, 2017). The March 2017 budget and the bus closure garnered significant local resistance involving protests by activist groups. The STC's closure politics have critical implications for the larger politics of health, as many former riders used the bus to attend medical appointments in bigger centers and the health system also transported medical products via the bus (Saskatchewan Transportation Company, 2010, p. 3). The closure provides an opportunity to advance knowledge on the political economy of transportation and health and the discourses that justify austerity decisions.

Below, we explore the politics–transportation–health nexus before presenting closure discourses and counter-discourses. Our aim in this paper is to describe how neoliberal discourses were adapted to justify an austerity decision in a Saskatchewan context. We interrogate how economic rationalization and minimization discourses were used to justify the STC closure and how counter-discourses by opponents focused on human rights and environmental dimensions of the closure remained marginal. We also explore the implications of the STC closure for the politics of health.

### **The political economy of health**

The idea that politics significantly determine health inequities is not new; clinical pathology pioneer, Rudolf Virchow, declared a century ago '[m]edicine is a social science and politics is nothing but medicine on a large scale' (Navarro, 2009, p. 441). Despite this long tradition, most contemporary accounts of health inequities remain apolitical, with debates on the politics of health focused on health system organization rather than politics *per se* (Bambra et al., 2005).

Political economy studies 'totalities understood from a materialist perspective' by connecting economic, political and cultural/ideological aspects of life to explain how societies reproduce themselves and the contradictions inherent in this process (Clement, 1997, p. 5). The political economy of health is a theoretical approach that differs from other ways of explaining health inequities such as biomedical, behavioral and genetic explanations of health inequities (Mackenbach, 2012). This perspective has yielded remarkable insights into how political and economic systems affect health, such as capitalism, and how it has depleted health through unhealthy working conditions (Doyal & Pennell, 1979).

Recent political economy of health research has interrogated the relationship between austerity and health. Austerity – 'drastic but selective public expenditure cuts' (Schrecker & Bambra, 2015, p. 69) – is becoming a popular political choice globally, driven by a neoliberal orthodoxy. Studies on the health effects of austerity (which do not necessarily explore the discourses that justify austerity decisions) have been critical in illuminating austerity's negative impacts in varied domains such as food insecurity, housing, public health budget cuts, and World Bank-led structural adjustment policy impacts on health in the global south (Alhassan & Castelli, 2020; Garthwaite, 2016; Ruckert & Labonté, 2014).

While these studies illuminate the relationship between politics and health under austerity, there remain critical gaps in current understandings of the role of discourse in justifying austerity decisions. How does austerity become socially acceptable? What types of local resistance are often available to challenge austerity and within what discourses? How do such dynamics relate to transportation and health?

### **The transportation-health nexus**

Public transportation is a social and structural determinant of health because transportation systems determine motor vehicle injury rates, physical activity levels and on a larger scale climate change (Chapman, 2007; McCarthy, 2006). Research on the transportation – health nexus has paid less attention to the political economy of transportation policy decisions although some literature has connected transportation and other structural issues such as poverty and social isolation (Lucas, 2004). A sparse body of political economy literature has also specifically focused on transportation

policy choices and argued that in the capitalist economy, dismantling public transportation increases car dependency, creating enormous wealth for oil companies since ‘the transport sector depends on oil for 96% of its energy’ (Dellheim, 2018, p. 21). We attempt here to connect the sparse political economy of transportation literature with the political economy of health literature by showing the role of discourse in shaping cuts to public transportation and the relevance of this for population health.

### ***Saskatchewan and the STC closure***

Saskatchewan has an export-based economy with oil, mining and public services representing significant proportions of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which makes the economy vulnerable to changes in global commodity prices. The province has a unique history involving a gradual but steady swing from being the cradle of North American social democracy to a consistent rise in conservatism. It was one of the first provinces to adopt aggressive neoliberal policies in the 1980s in Canada (Warnock, 2005). This has laid a solid political foundation for contemporary austerity.

The 1944 election of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Saskatchewan ushered in a wave of social and health-related welfare state programs (one of these being the STC) mostly in favor of the laboring classes (Conway & Conway, 2015). These programs were however largely reversed by the coming to power of the Conservatives under Premier Grant Devine in the 1980s and neoliberal policies were actively pursued (Smith, 2018). The period was characterized by deregulation, tax breaks for large and small businesses, and attacks on labor unions, leading sometimes to a rural–urban polarization. Since then, the Conservatives have maintained a strong base in rural Saskatchewan, especially beginning from the 1990s (Conway & Conway, 2015). The Saskatchewan Party, a party firmly cemented on the conservative side of the political spectrum, oversaw the STC closure and was elected around the time of the 2008 global financial crisis. While this was a period characterized by rising unemployment globally and in Canada, Saskatchewan enjoyed growth and opportunities for job creation, given global demand for oil and gas (Smith, 2018). Riding on the commodities boom, the party pursued free market policies of low taxes to businesses and generally low spending in the public sector, under the rubric of ‘transformative change’ and creating a “new” Saskatchewan’ (Enoch, 2016, p. 1). There was also a strong desire to reduce the government’s ‘foot print’ and to increase efficiency by reducing the public service by up to 15% while selling ‘non-core out of province assets’ (Ministry of Finance, 2010, p. 25). It is against this wider contextual background, albeit with some suddenness, that the 70-year-old STC was shut down. Although this study contributes to current understandings of the connections between austerity, public transportation, and health, it primarily focuses on the politics of the STC closure, which is a health equity issue, especially for vulnerable populations in Saskatchewan.

### **Methodology**

This study forms part of a large-scale qualitative study on the politics, health, and health equity impacts of the STC closure conducted between 2017 and 2020. The study received research ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board (BEH 1219). The study reported here is a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) of parliamentary Hansards, newspaper articles, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The ‘Saskatchewan Transportation Company’ subject area of the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly Hansard was downloaded. Grey literature search site ‘Factiva’ was searched with the key word ‘Saskatchewan Transportation Company’ from December 2014 to 2019, yielding 712 newspaper articles and supplemented by hand searches of other news sites, culminating in 751 articles. Title screening showed 230 repeated titles and full-text screening revealed another 212 republished articles (under different titles). Finally, two FGDs were conducted with activists (7 members) and Indigenous stakeholders (2 members) on the politics of the STC closure and transcribed verbatim. These FGDs explored stakeholders’ understandings of the political

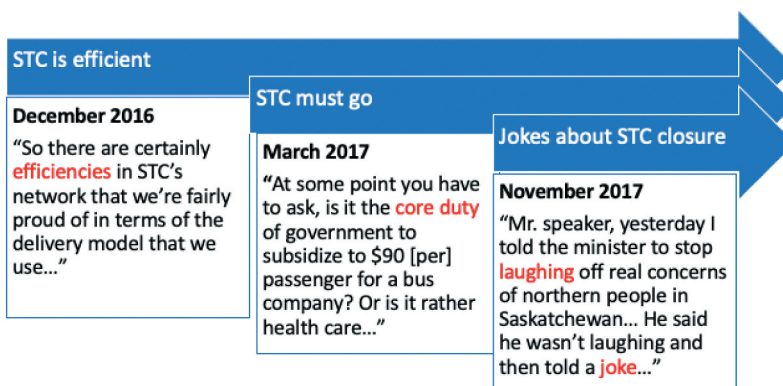
rationale for STC closure. In the presentation of findings, quotes from FGD data are presented as 'FGD Activists' and 'FGD Indigenous'. All data were imported into NVivo 12 software for analysis. Please see supplementary [Figure 1](#) for newspaper sources.

### Data analysis

Data from the three sources were subjected to a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). FDA does not treat language as a neutral means of transmitting information but pays attention to the role of language in the 'constitution of social life' (Willig, 2013, p. 380). Language can privilege one version of events over another, to 'order reality in a certain way ... enable and constrain the production of knowledge ... to allow for certain ways of thinking about reality while excluding others' (Cheek, 2004, p. 1142). These constructions of reality can help maintain existing power relationships through specific portrayals of subjects and objects of discourse (Hanson & Cheng, 2018). To operationalize our FDA, we employed the six-step process suggested by Willig (2013). This involves (1) Discursive constructions (examining how the STC and its former users were constructed), (2) Identifying discourses (how different actors; MLAs [Members of the Legislative Assembly], activists and the public constructed discourses on the bus closure), (3) Action orientation (reflecting on what is gained by each type of construction), (4) Subject positions (exploring what positions became available to subjects such as former bus users), (5) Practice (what became permissible to be done based on 1–4), and (6) Subjectivity (examining what reality was created based on 1–5). Guided by these operational frames, all data were coded to understand the (il)logic that underpinned arguments for keeping or closing the STC. Data from each source were analysed individually and then integrated. Findings are presented according to discourses and counter-discourses instead of Willig's (2013) six steps to allow room for engaging with the discourses and counter-discourses. However, under each discourse or counter-discourse, the insights from Willig's (2013) six-step process are highlighted such as how the STC and its former users were constructed, what was gained by each construction, what became possible through such constructions and the types of realities and subjectivities created by such constructions.

### Methodological considerations and reflexivity

As activist researchers, we approached this study from a critical ontological perspective, paying particular attention to power. Our methodological choices have been guided by these presuppositions and rooted in the need for a 'moral praxis', where health research challenges power and advocates for the vulnerable (Morse, 2012).



**Figure 1.** The evolution of discourses on STC closure in Hansard. Source: Authors based on Parliamentary Hansard.

## Findings

In the sections that follow, we describe the discourses that facilitated the STC closure and how they framed the closure as a ‘victimless decision’ justified on economic grounds. We also describe counter-discourses of resistance, how such discourses were framed, and their implications for the politics of health. As shown in [Figure 1](#), there was a rapid evolution by proponents of the closure from representing the bus as an important institution that was safe from closure to the vilification of the bus and the complete normalization of the decision to close it.

## Discourses

### *Economic rationalization*

The primary logic offered by the Saskatchewan Party for ‘winding down’ the STC was an economic argument that claimed the STC was an unsustainable business venture that ‘has only been able to continue operating with a large annual subsidy from taxpayers’ (*Hansard*, 22 March 2017). This economic logic depoliticized an intimately political decision, perpetuating other discourses that ignored the fact that the original purpose of the company was ‘not for financial profit, but for the good of the whole people’ (*TheLeader-Post* 5 December 1945). The STC was portrayed as an unprofitable business throughout media sources with phrases such as ‘perennial white elephant’ (*Postmedia Breaking News*, Mar 13 2015), ‘money losing’ (appearing 41 times in Factiva sources) and ‘money draining’ (*Winnipeg Free Press*, Aug 15 2017) used to describe it. In one case, a right-wing libertarian organization, the Canadian Taxpayers’ Federation described the STC as ‘a failing operation ... It’s not that STC had a few bad years; they were all bad years’ (*Postmedia Breaking News*, 16 October 2017). Although the March 2017 budget saw cuts to different social services and programs, the government claimed that savings from the failing STC could be spent on other social programs. As a Saskatchewan Party MLA noted ‘they keep talking about, we need more funds for social services ... education. We need more funds for health care. Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that 85 to 100 CAD million could well be used in those other needs and those other priorities of the government’ (*Hansard*, 6 April 2017).

### *Minimization and negation*

This discourse involved the essentialization, minimization, and outright negation of the value of the bus system to its thousands of former users. The discourse emphasized STC’s ‘ridership decline’ over the years (*Hansard*, 23 March 2017, April 26, 2 May 2018, 22 November 2017), dismissed claims by opposition MLAs that the closure could have negative consequences as ‘scare tactics’ (*Hansard*, Nov 1 2017) and claimed the closure would mainly affect former employees and their pensions. The idea that the closure would primarily affect former employees of the STC was repeated throughout parliamentary debates, with a Saskatchewan Party MLA stating for example, ‘[w]e don’t think it’s a laughing matter because we know that the lives of 250 or so valued public servants changed significantly’ (*Hansard*, Mar 23 2017). By denying the existence of the almost 200,000 former riders of the STC (from its final year of operation alone) and considering the potential effects of the closure as creating ‘some inconvenience for people’ (*Canadian Press* 1 November 2017), proposed post-closure solutions appeared adequate. As the minister in charge of the STC noted, any service gaps created by the closure would be provided by ‘non-profit organizations, service clubs, people, friends, and neighbours ... just like people do in Saskatchewan [to] help out their friends and neighbours’ (*Hansard*, March 28 2017). Here, the retreat of the state and the shift of responsibility to individuals were represented as an opportunity for ‘neighborliness’. Beyond the minimization of potential effects on individual former bus users, potential systemic (health, small business, agriculture) effects were treated similarly, with ministers (without evidence *per se*) claiming the closure would be innocuous. For example, the minister in charge noted ‘the wind down of STC has had no impact on our child and family services’ (*Hansard*, May 1 2018).

### **The STC as burden and relic**

A third discourse, more evident in media sources than the Hansard relied on representing the STC as a relic of a socialist past and a burden that had outlived its usefulness. Here the bus was not described as a modern transportation system with Wi-Fi and other modern technologies. A story from the *Regina Leader-Post* (24 March 2017) included a description by a member of the public referring to the STC as: '[An] albatross, at last, after subsidizing it for hundreds of millions of dollars over the years ... Tommy Douglas's Socialist idea of a public run bus line is going on the trash heap of history'. Drawing on logics of the bus as antiquarian and obsolete, a Saskatchewan Party MLA described the closure as a mere fulfillment of the wishes of Saskatchewan people who saw the bus as a burden. The MLA noted: 'We just made the final decision, but the people of Saskatchewan decided individually that they weren't going to use the buses. They were the ones that made the decision that they weren't going to use it' (*Melfort Journal*, Jul 25 2017). In these descriptions, the bus was portrayed as an 'albatross' and a burden, a service that was no longer needed in Saskatchewan.

### **Government discretion/charity**

This fourth discourse emerged and became reified through a lawsuit between the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and the government on the closure. The discourse, which was later countered by human rights and democratic deficit counter-discourses, justified the closure by arguing that the government had a right as a matter of policy to decide whether to operate a bus system or not; thus, the closure even if at a whim of a right-wing, pro-market government was presented as legal. One newspaper story described the court case in these terms:

Most of the arguments [in court] hinged on its [the STC] status as a Crown corporation, legal acts that govern such agencies, and definitions of 'privatization.' [The government lawyer], said the government by law is allowed to wind down and dissolve the bus company. He said funding of STC is 'completely discretionary' by the government, which can choose "to devote those resources elsewhere" (*Postmedia Breaking News*, 19 May 2017).

In this discourse, the rights of former bus users were not treated as relevant. In fact, most of the debate was reduced to procedural issues and technical definitions of 'privatization'. The judge, who ruled in favour of the government in a 45-page ruling on the legality of shutting down the STC noted: '[A]s a matter of law and constitutional principle, a decision respecting the disbursement of public funds is within the authority of the legislature alone and is not justiciable' (*Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1374 v Saskatchewan (Finance)*, 2017)

This discourse of STC as an object of government discretion was legitimated through the judiciary as above. The ruling was based on a correct interpretation of the law and reveals the limits of the judiciary in defending public services such as the STC or promoting health equity.

### **Counter-discourses**

Counter-discourses were promoted by members of the public and activist groups (e.g. Stop the Cuts, Save STC, Colonialism No More, etc.) and their mechanisms ranged from writing opinion pieces to mass protests sometimes leading to arrests (*Regina Leader-Post* Jun 2 2017).

### **Utility and practical necessity**

This counter-discourse emerged primarily in response to minimization discourses by affirming the bus and its former users. The discourse represented the bus as a practical necessity and integral part of life in the sparsely distributed geography of Saskatchewan. Describing the closure, one NDP (New Democratic Party) MLA noted:

[T]hey're completely scrapping a Crown corporation that ties our vast province together and, importantly, serves those in need ... selling STC is wrong, and it's desperate. People rely on STC to access education and employment and training ... our small businesses, our producers — on the parcel service ... people access it for health care (*Hansard*, Mar 30 2017).

Here the bus was represented not as an unused service but one that was critical to accessing services. Furthermore, the complex interconnections between the bus and the health system and the vital role of the bus in linking the province were emphasized. A focus group member noted:

when you have one branch of government [Ministry of Health] that says, we have this as our mandate for the good of our entire population while at the same time undercutting the ability for people to access that, [it] is absolutely, absolutely ludicrous. (FGD Activists)

### **Marginalization and victimization**

According to this counter-discourse, the STC closure marginalized and victimized specific segments of the population. The discourse was essentially used by the NDP (New Democratic Party) to threaten the ruling Saskatchewan Party of the potential for losing votes among specific subpopulation groups, such as rural people who had 'been taken for granted' (*Hansard*, 31 October 2017). The groups referenced were victims of domestic violence (women), Indigenous populations, seniors, people with disabilities, former medical pass holders, and 'the most vulnerable people in the north' (*Hansard*, 17 May 2017). In media sources, poignant stories were presented of people with disabilities who could no longer participate in social life. A *Global News* (10 May 2018) story about a former bus user quoted him as saying 'now I can only go when community living will provide transport. My freedom has been taken away ... Without STC I am in prison.' A similar story from the *Regina Leader-Post* (29 May 2017) described how 'seniors travelling to Saskatoon for medical reasons will have to "beg and borrow" for rides from their families [and STC closure] may result in more people missing important appointments.' Here, the closure of the STC was portrayed as a traumatic societal transition with devastating and inequitable consequences.

### **STC closure as neoliberal and colonial ideology**

According to opponents, the STC closure was ideological (neoliberalism and colonization), requiring careful analysis to understand. A member of one of the activist groups noted that the closure 'has totally deregulated transportation and the culture of safety that we had under STC' (*Postmedia Breaking News* 11 July 2017). The closure was interpreted as a neoliberal decision with the ultimate aim 'to transform Saskatchewan into a less-connected, less-functional province' (*Regina Leader-Post* 30 March 2017). The closure was also interpreted as a neoliberal decision, where neoliberalism is 'an ideology that makes poor people dispensable [leading to] increased polarization' (FGD Activists). Additionally, the closure was interpreted as uniquely affecting Indigenous populations. For example, regarding reconciliation and the issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG), the closure was 'more problematic when you are talking about Indigenous populations ... [and in that sense] there's a structural racism that's in there' (FGD Indigenous). Regarding Indigenous people and their ability to flourish, the closure was seen as a way to 'smack them down and keep them there' (FGD Activists), in this sense 'it's a kick in the teeth instead of [a] hand up' (FGD Activists); ultimately 'it's colonialism' (FGD Activists). For Indigenous people as well, the failure of the government to confer with stakeholders prior to the decision was seen as antithetical to reconciliation. A focus group member quizzed 'When it comes to First Nations populations in particular, like if things like reconciliation mean anything at all, why aren't you having more of a mechanism by which you create spaces where their voices can be heard?' (FGD Indigenous).



### **Evidence deficit**

This counter-discourse pointed out the absence of or inconsistencies in evidence surrounding the STC closure and the lack of transparency in the process leading to the closure. It was based on two main ideas: firstly, demands for an evidence trail where others could independently arrive at the 85 CAD million savings the government claimed the decision would bring. As an NDP MLA remarked:

I want to talk a little bit about math . . . . And the Premier and other ministers will stand up and quote their numbers. We don't know really where those numbers come from . . . . You know, I'm an old math teacher, and that's often what we say is show your work. (Hansard, 30 October 2017).

In a committee meeting to discuss the closure, an NDP MLA asked if the minister responsible could provide how closure savings figures were arrived at, 'anything, correspondence, anything that would be helpful' (Hansard May 2 2017) and the minister referenced 'numerous in-person meetings and phone calls' (Hansard May 2 2017). This counter-discourse also inculcated the government for intentionally providing misleading numbers; 'the last year of operation, the actual budget was 10 million . . . they kept saying 85[million dollars] over five years, but I don't know about you, but 10 times 5 is 50.' (FGD Activists). The other dimension of the discourse challenged the definition of 'cost' or 'savings' from the closure and called for 'a social audit of the real costs [which] would show that people are now spending far more in real dollars to attend appointments, to travel, to visit family or to move blood and medical supplies' (Saskatoon Star Phoenix May 30 2018).

### **Democratic deficit**

This counter-discourse challenged the idea that the operation of the bus was based on government discretion and considered the bus closure an illegitimate and undemocratic decision. Proponents of the discourse argued that the closure should have been preceded by 'a province-wide consultation [that would] provide extra special support for groups or individuals or communities that literally have no voice' (FGD Indigenous). Media sources also referenced how the 'the current government did not give any consideration to all the many stakeholders who have been compelled to publicly voice how their lives and businesses will be negatively affected' (Foreign Affairs 11 April 2017). Here, the non-consultation prior to the STC closure was described as depriving people from accessing public services without any clear opportunity for these members of the public to participate in a decision that had critical implications for their lives.

### **Human rights and STC as symbol**

This discourse, which was absent in the Hansards, minimal in media sources, and most evident in the focus group data, was a rights-based discourse demanding that the closure be reinterpreted through a human rights lens. The *Regina Leader-Post* ran a story about former STC users appealing for a human rights review of the decision to close the STC:

through a letter-writing campaign, a passionate group of former STC passengers are trying to put pressure on the provincial government to create an alternative accessible transportation service in Saskatchewan; the letters are being sent to the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission (SHRC) [for SHRC to] make an official recommendation to the government . . . to fill a gap in transportation services especially for people with disabilities. (Regina Leader-Post 3 October 2018)

In another story, a Regina woman 'filed a human rights complaint against the provincial government, alleging the closure of the Saskatchewan Transportation Company discriminates against her and other Indigenous women' (Regina Leader-Post 22 June 2017). In the focus groups, a participant noted that 'free and accessible transportability I think is a human right' (FGD Activists). Thus, the government had 'fallen down on the social contract . . . alienating [and] putting at physical, emotional, spiritual, relational risk those who have no other options – they have beyond fallen between the

cracks' (FGD Activists). The closure was also interpreted as violating rights to livelihood, freedom from violence, and the right to health (FGD Activists).

### **Climate change**

This final counter-discourse – again non-existent in the Hansards, but more prominent in media and focus group discussions – resisted the closure on climate change and environmental grounds. One media source wrote: 'The STC efficiently provided passenger and freight services ... until Canada's most prominent opponent of climate action, Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall, shut it down this past summer' (*Quesnel Cariboo Observer* 17 February 2018). Another media source described how 'without rapid expansion of public transit, we cannot reduce our carbon emissions to mitigate the worst effects of climate change' (*Foreign Affairs* 10 October 2019). In this discourse, closing STC meant Saskatchewan was not moving 'in the right direction environmentally' (FGD Activists) and the environmental interpretations are necessary because 'we can't for a second think that the elimination of a bus service isn't linked to increased emissions by cars' (FGD Activists). Environmental discourses thus challenged the idea that the STC was unused or expensive and argued for the need to think of the STC in very different terms.

Supplementary Figure 2 summarizes the main discourses and counter-discourses from the three data sources and contains both the primary (P) and secondary (S) discourses that formed the debate over STC closure. The arrows depict the specific discourses that counter-discourses were directed at or opposed. Human rights and climate change discourses are shown without any arrows because they were less directed at specific discourses and can be seen as a response to most if not all presented discourses. For example, by asserting that public transportation is a human right, activists were arguing against minimization and negation (people have a right to use the bus even if they are few), economic rationalization (human rights are applicable not only when they are economically viable), and government discretion (human rights are inalienable). From the climate change perspective as well, global environmental destruction can hardly be justified on economic grounds or any of the other reasons offered by the government.

### **Discussion**

The discourses above describe how the STC closure was framed and justified although they do not necessarily say why the closure was made possible. The government's strategy of cutting so many programs and services seems to have widened the Overton window, such that the STC closure would be seen as one casualty in a grand neoliberal austerity war against public debt. The fact that most STC former bus riders were low-income seniors and Indigenous people (Saskatchewan Transportation Company, 2010, 2017) certainly made the company vulnerable. The minimization discourses, albeit without evidence or facts, were mobilized to discount such former users and are revelatory of the ethos of neoliberal austerity discourses. These construct 'public problems' (Gusfield, 1981), or in this case the usage of public services by vulnerable populations, as non-usage to justify ideologically based political choices.

The discourses and counter-discourses presented two significantly different representations of the STC bus company and reveal extremely different ways of making sense of neoliberal austerity. The March 2017 budget saw austerity measures particularly targeting the poor which have altered the entire institutional structure of Saskatchewan. We explored a neoliberal austerity decision that has widescale implications for the lives, health and wellbeing of thousands of people and in the process revealed the discourses of the austerity regime within which the STC closure occurred.

Our study raises critical questions on the place of evidence, democracy, human rights, and health under neoliberal economic policy making. The underlying neoliberalism of the austerity decision to close the STC was later made the most evident by the fact that the former STC bus depot in Saskatchewan's capital, Regina, was converted into a police station, signifying the most nuanced

manifestation of neoliberalism involving not simply the retreat of the welfare state but the strengthening of the punitive arm of government. In other words, 'the systematic tilting of state priorities ... from the protective (feminine and collectivizing) pole to the disciplinary (masculine and individualizing) pole' (Wacquant, 2012, p. 73).

Austerity's health effects have been chronicled globally (Basu et al., 2017). While many researchers have emphasized and debunked the trope of individual responsibility (McBride & Mitrea, 2017), characterized in our data as austerity opening up an opportunity for 'neighbourliness', there is also a powerful democratic deficit, as well as a pernicious negation of public service users that appears to be a necessary antecedent in the justification of austerity budgets. In the specific case of the STC closure, the courts were used where necessary to justify the neoliberal austerity decision. McBride (2016) provides several examples of how austerity is 'constitutionalized' in Europe and North America. In parliament, arguments on whether to keep or shut down the STC became solely about technical definitions of 'privatization' and procedural missteps rather than the possible violation of the human rights of thousands of people who would be left without the ability to travel for leisure or to access health services. This illustrates the role of power in shaping health and health inequities under neoliberal austerity regimes.

Indeed, in the case of Saskatchewan, as focus group participants sought to show, the fact that neoliberal austerity dispossesses Indigenous people and prevents access to public services has clear ties to histories of colonization that involved dispossessing Indigenous peoples of land and other resources (Daschuk, 2013). The destruction of the commons, in this case public transportation, through austerity has several parallels with colonialism not only through dispossession but because the ultimate beneficiaries of such policies have been capitalists, historically through access to land, business and resources and contemporarily through car dependency that benefits oil companies and the energy sector (Dellheim, 2018). Elaborating on these connections could be a useful and nuanced way of providing counter-discourses to the ideological hegemony of neoliberal austerity.

It is important to consider the highly marginalized human rights discourse. In the case of people with disabilities in particular, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the right to mobility Under Section 6. Canada also ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which advocates for access to dignified transportation for persons with disabilities. The Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission has advocated for public transportation in the past and cited Supreme Court judgements from as far back as 1997 (*Eaton v Brant County Board of Education*) which demand that society 'fine tune' its structures, especially those with underlying assumptions that exclude people with disabilities (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2010). Yet these laws and provisions did not prevent the STC closure which violates human rights and was justified on economic grounds.

On the question of evidence and its role in public policy under neoliberal austerity regimes, the vast body of transportation literature that connects the use of private vehicles to climate change (Chapman, 2007; World Health Organization, 2000) was barely ever mentioned either in media or parliamentary sources and thus important potential effects of a decision that would have global consequences received little attention. A similar issue that received little attention in the decision to close the STC is the idea of the social determinants of health. While transportation is a noted social determinant of health, the phrase 'social determinants' neither appears in media sources nor parliamentary discourses and indeed what was seen was a decoupling of the transportation-health connection several times by proponents of the closure with claims that the funds saved from closing the bus system would be redirected to healthcare services (see Figure 1). It would therefore be useful for scholars of the social determinants of health and practitioners to re-politicize health and to engage more seriously with public debates on austerity, especially where it threatens social determinants such as transportation. This could be done through writing op-eds and engaging in protests where academics and practitioners appropriately use social determinants of health language. This would bridge the gap between what is known about the social determinants of health (in the academy and by practitioners) and public debates on austerity decisions that have health implications. In the STC's case, we wrote an advocacy

brief and published other opinion pieces in local newspapers to share some of the findings of our research. We believe that such activism coupled with public engagement on the health-depleting effects of austerity can play a useful role in protecting public services and promoting population health.

The important role of activists in defending public services and the commons in times of austerity requires more scholarship, especially since in the case of the STC closure, activists not only provided counter-discourses but often put themselves at great personal risk and risk of arrest (by refusing to get off the final bus, for example). Paying more attention to austerity discourses and the politics of health would be a useful addition to our understanding of austerity's dynamics and its implications for health equity. Our research demonstrates the profound lack of scientific evidence to justify the STC closure and opens room for research on the health and health equity impacts of the STC closure. Although not reported here, the larger research project within which this manuscript is located seeks to explore such questions.

The interest in conducting this research was to understand the logic behind the STC closure and associated discourses. The wide array of evidence parsed does not suggest that a specific 'logic' justified the STC closure, rather undisguised political force won over all arguments. If health is to be re-politicized, researchers should routinely peruse parliamentary Hansards to understand the (il)logic that sometimes determines public policy.

## Conclusion

A summative statement that can be made about the STC and its closure is that throughout the argumentation, reasoning, and discourse around the utility and viability of the bus company, human rights, social determinants of health and environmental discourses remained marginal. In the Saskatchewan context where the ruling government's major support-base is rural, it mobilized discourses of negation of bus users to justify austerity while also relying on an ahistorical economic rationalization discourse. Understanding these manoeuvres would be important for understanding how neoliberal discourses are mobilized to justify austerity in other parts of Canada and elsewhere since local particularities often influence how neoliberal discourses are deployed. The consistent portrayal of the buses as a (taxpayer) burden rather than a right, a symbol of progressiveness, equality and democracy facilitated the closure and represents at best a misunderstanding of the meaning and value of public transportation and at worst a retreat of social democracy and the triumph and entrenchment of Neoliberalization in Saskatchewan, the cradle of North American social democracy.

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