

'New Sask.' requires new public policy

By David McGrane, *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, January 19, 2012, A7

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Everyone is talking about the "New Saskatchewan."

As opposed to being a perennial "have not" province, the New Saskatchewan is the land of unlimited economic opportunity where the world is beating down our doors to buy our grain, potash, uranium and oil. It is the place to be, instead of a place to be from.

Brad Wall and his conservative Saskatchewan Party have ridden this wave of economic optimism to two consecutive election victories. However, few have stepped back and asked how we collectively should deal with this new-found prosperity. What kind of public policy does the New Saskatchewan require?

Despite the robust economic growth, significant public policy challenges remain for the provincial government.

The province's poverty rates remain stubbornly high. The local economies of First Nations communities are underdeveloped. Aboriginal people remain excluded from decisionmaking about the public policies that have significant effects on their lives. Small family farms are struggling to survive and labour unrest is growing.

Saskatchewan has not come to terms with the high greenhouse gas emissions caused by its resource-driven economic growth.

Municipal planning is done in a haphazard manner that does not address the future consequences of urban sprawl, while the province has attracted thousands of international immigrants without an adequate strategy to retain these newcomers or attend to their culture needs.

On top of it all, after 15 years of tax cuts, the government is facing difficulty in maintaining quality social programs, due to pressures related to population aging, fluctuations in resource royalties, and the unpredictability of federal transfer payments.

The Brad Wall government's conservatism does not show itself in bold right-wing policy solutions such as the privatization of Crown Corporations, a flat personal income tax rate, or draconian cuts to health and education. Rather, the Wall government's conservatism is seen in simply doing little or nothing about important social issues that face the province.

There are several examples of innovations the government could pursue to ensure that economic growth, social development and public policy are interconnected.

A comprehensive strategy to manage urban growth could be enshrined in provincial legislation, and existing ethnocultural communities could be given funding to settle immigrants from their homelands. Local food production could be encouraged, and a climate change secretariat created as a mechanism to co-ordinate provincial policy with local activism, as well as with federal and international initiatives.

Like several other provinces, Saskatchewan could undertake to develop a detailed poverty reduction strategy.

To prepare for the impending retirement of baby boomers, the province could increase its income support programs for seniors, and also improve the availability, quality and affordability of home care.

The provincial government's "duty to consult" could be extended to social policy areas of particular concern to First Nations peoples - such as postsecondary education, child welfare and elder care. The province could create a fund to finance "social economy" enterprises on reserves.

To pay for the construction of this new social infrastructure, provincial taxation policy could focus on revenue generation through maintaining current tax rates and examining new forms of taxation such as carbon taxes and a harmonized sales tax, with rebates to low-income earners.

The lesson for Saskatchewan, and other provinces, is that economic growth does not magically solve entrenched social problems, and that prosperity threatens to dissipate if worrisome social trends are left unchecked.

Ultimately, good public policy is needed to make sure that economic prosperity benefits all citizens and provides long-term societal benefits alongside short-term economic growth.