

An idea that could pay big dividends

By Murray Mandryk, The Leader-Post January 26, 2010

All one has come to expect from stakeholder groups is for them to lobby government for things that benefit those they represent . . . laws, policies and programs that, sadly, often come at the expense of rival stakeholders.

But every now and then, a stakeholder group comes forward with an idea that goes well beyond that.

Take the Regina Chamber of Commerce's recent proposal to use provincial government surpluses to pay down debt and then apply the interest payments saved to reduced business and homeowner education property taxes. Not only would this be beneficial to most everyone in the province, but it would force government to deal with its easily ignored problem of debt.

And coming at a time when the Saskatchewan Party government is looking at new ways to make ends meet -- including reducing the size of the province's civil service through attrition -- the chamber's idea stands out from the usual self-serving stakeholder proposals that come forward in advance of the spring budget.

In fact, expect the debate over the potential civil service reduction to be a prime example of how stakeholders aren't contributing as much to public discourse as they should be.

Undoubtedly, the recent talk from Premier Brad Wall about how full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in the Saskatchewan civil service have increased by 23.8 per cent or 2,493.1 jobs in the past 10 years (from 10,174.1 employees in 1999-2000 to 11,677.1 FTEs in 2005-06 to 12,677.2 FTEs in 2009-10) is something we should be debating

Exactly what level of service we should expect government to provide is of interest to us all and one that is ever changing. It's also rather complex. While one might assume this is strictly a problem created by the past NDP administration (it hired an additional 1,697.4 FTEs or 16.8-per-cent more in nearly eight years it was in charge), by comparison, the civil service has grown by an additional 737.7 positions or 6.2 per cent in the Sask. Party years.

More critically, does it truly make sense to cut back strictly by way of attrition? If that were extended to the entire government sector, what would this do to the Sask. Party's plans to recruit more nurses?

But don't expect such nuanced debate from the stakeholders. Instead, expect the predictable condemnation from the unions for this politically motivated attack on the civil service while the Chambers of Commerce, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and the Canadian

Taxpayers Federation applaud it as government finally getting a handle on runaway administration costs.

It's how public discourse most often works in this province, which is why it often doesn't work very well.

In fact, it's actually getting to be rather rare to hear a stakeholder group advocate truly thoughtful public policy that doesn't just benefit them, but also fits into the bigger picture. And even less often do we have debate that's not about one stakeholder group receiving a benefit at the expense of another.

This is why the Regina Chamber's proposal to use surpluses to pay down debt and take the incurred reduction in interest payments to cut education property taxes is so refreshingly different.

Unlike a lot of proposals from stakeholder groups, it doesn't directly come out of the hide of rivals -- the problem with so many past policies stakeholders have advocated. Certainly, this is the problem with the Sask. Party's Bill 80 affecting unionized construction workers to the benefit of construction companies over employees, or the former NDP government's most available hours legislation that would have benefited part-time workers more than employers.

The chamber's proposal is simply a good idea, worth considering.

Sure, tax reductions would be modest and non-existent in years like this, when we are actually adding to debt through deficit budgeting. But there's a lot to be said for stakeholders advocating modest, sustainable policy -- especially, when the policy benefits everyone.

And there's a lot to be said for stakeholders advocating something that goes beyond the usual tiresome bickering.

- Mandryk is the political columnist for the Leader-Post.

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