

Macleans.ca Interview: Brad Wall

The Premier of Saskatchewan stopped by *Macleans*'s last week to talk about lessons learned from Alberta's oil boom, and how his government plans to deal with Saskatchewan's current labour shortage

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Q: You're in Toronto for a job fair?

A: We are. We have a people shortage in Saskatchewan. Right now there are 10,000 jobs on our jobs.ca website, which is a wonderful problem to have. I'll back up—we have been suffering over the decades from a vicious cycle, where economic underperformance has meant an out migration, which has exacerbated the underperformance.

Our number one source of help is the First Nations and Métis people. Our government has moved and will move further with respect to investing in training. We've engaged the First Nations with the Enterprise Saskatchewan Initiative. Another source of help with the labour shortage are ex-patriots. Saskatchewan has been known to be a great place to be from, but right now we are a great place to be. We want to get people back. Thirdly, [we need to attract] immigrants from all over the world and from the rest of Canada. We have a great story to tell at a time when, unfortunately, the story is not so good in central Canada, and in the manufacturing sector.

Q: What's the biggest obstacle when it comes to attracting immigrants to Saskatchewan?

A: Typically the larger urban centres have the best shot at first-time Canadians. We have multicultural centres in Saskatoon and Regina. In Swift Current, my hometown of 16,000 people, we have a growing Philippine population. It's a lesser scale than the larger urban centres but it's a message we need to get out. And we have a great quality of life. Our housing prices are relatively low. It's still cost effective to live in our province.

Q: Alberta is sending people on missions overseas to attract people. Are you using any model from any other province?

A: We are. Manitoba has a great model. First of all, carving out a unique relationship with the national government, dealing with the landed issues as best we can from a provincial perspective and getting out the message. [Representatives from] Winnipeg, for example, have been to Israel. They've also targeted former Eastern Bloc Jewish people who are now in Israel. Our minister of immigration has been to the Philippines and the Ukraine. We are going to continue to take our message to other countries. We have 50 companies with us at this job fair. It's one thing to talk about quality of life, how much sunshine there is, and "boy is it ever easy to get a tee time in Saskatchewan," but there's gotta be a job there. We wanted actual job offers ready to go in case somebody said, "I'm interested."

Q: What lessons have you learned from Alberta?

A: The advice from Alberta has been to focus on debt but watch out on the infrastructure side of things. We can put some roadblocks up to continue the prosperity in Saskatchewan if we are not dealing with the infrastructure demands in a reactive sense. Our first budget was a reflection of that. There was a debt component in it that certainly reflected debt reduction, but more so we were focused on infrastructure—[the budget included] about \$1 billion in infrastructure development compared with \$600 million the year previous.

We are trying to learn from both the successes and the challenges of the province next door. We have 10,000 square miles of potential oil sands development area. From an oil sands perspective—and infrastructure and immigration—we have a chance to try to learn from those who have gone first.

Q: You're headed for a \$3.1 billion surplus. How do you spend that money?

A: One of our first pieces of legislation we passed as a government, called the Growth and Financial Security Act, prescribes in law that 50 per cent of unbudgeted surpluses go to debt. The other 50 per cent is for economic initiatives. Read: infrastructure. If we don't do anything more than what we've done already and what's prescribed in law, we would have reduced the debt by a third in our first year. I think you'll see us going further than that this fall and balancing the need for sharing of the wealth with the people of the province. My preference is broad-based tax relief, not rebates or energy rebates.

Q: What kind of tax relief?

A: I want to announce it after the federal election but we will say this: we tax low and middle income people in our province at a higher rate, when you look at our exemptions, than anywhere else in the country. There's also property tax. We rely more on property to fund education than anywhere else in Canada.

Q: Do you support the notion that it's time Ontario gets equalization? Are you ready to start writing big cheques?

A: Whoever is eligible is eligible. Everyone in the country hopes Ontario doesn't ever need to be eligible, but if you have fiscal federalism that has certain formulas in place, it is what it is. We benefited from the formula and now we are a have province. We want to stay that way. It's reasonable that we want to give back to the country that's given a lot to us and we have to make sure that changes aren't made to fiscal federalism that turns it into a program that potentially kneecaps the part of Canada's economy that is working well. That wouldn't make sense.

Q: Are there specific tweaks to the formula that are needed to ensure that Saskatchewan isn't kneecapped?

A: I'm saying that if we were looking to change the formula as a country and it hurt our capacity to contribute to the Canadian economy, that wouldn't make a lot of sense. We are here to promote the fact that there is opportunity in Saskatchewan for those who have lost jobs in the manufacturing sector in Ontario and elsewhere. We are mindful and respectful of the fact that that it has been tough on the economy here and this is home, but one of the strengths of our federation is that when one economic region of the country is under pressure, it's likely that some other part is growing.

Q: Some observers have said you've taken a partisan stance during this election campaign. Is that fair? Have you endorsed anybody?

A: We are the Saskatchewan Party. Our job is to be intensely partisan in the interests of Saskatchewan. So if it's a carbon tax or frankly any cap-and-trade model that is not about finding an answer to the question on the carbon footprint of our economy, then what is it really about? We will be strong advocates and will put our money where our mouth is in Saskatchewan for initiatives that find an answer.

We have a chance in North America to regain some key economic strength if we focus on innovation. I don't agree with some editorials in national papers that say premiers should stay in their own pond. When there are issues at stake that effect your province in a federal election, you should be engaged and weigh in. That's what I've been trying to do. Have I endorsed anyone? I have. I have endorsed our local member of parliament, a great MP and a good friend, (Conservative party candidate) David Anderson.

Q: You just mentioned cap and trade, which is the Conservative position. Some have wondered why you're not as vocal in your criticism of the Conservatives' plan.

A: We've done the math and it looks like a seven or eight per cent increase on our electrical bills by 2012 as a result of the Conservative plan, and a 41 per cent increase in our bills because of the Green Shift.

Q: You mentioned in your platform that you have some targets for emissions. What are you doing specifically to reduce emissions?

A: A couple things. The clean coal initiative would be the largest and most expensive of those. We were looking at \$1.4 billion in the largest demonstration project in North America, as far as we know, at Boundary Dam in Estevan. We continue to fund the international leading CO2 sequestering project at Weyburn that will sequester 30 million tonnes by the time it's finished. We're also using that to enhance oil recovery. So far the CO2 is stable and the research is good. The person responsible for some of this leadership is Malcolm Wilson, who won the Nobel prize when Al Gore did. We are also trying to enable our citizens with a green strategy.

Q: One of the things that hasn't been on the table at all during this election and is arguably more important to people than the environment is health care. A study by the

Frontier Centre for Public Policy ranks the quality of Saskatchewan's health care ninth out of 10 provinces. What is your reaction?

A: We campaigned that on too many counts, we are letting down too many of our residents in terms of health care. In the '90s, like in many provinces, there were massive cuts on the training side. But what we saw in other provinces in the late '90s was a recognition that cutting the training seats for nurses and other front line staff is not going to bode well for the future and we better go back and do some reclamation work. We did not in Saskatchewan. We had an acute shortage. We went to the Philippines within two months of the election and we were able to sign 300 new nurses. Some have already started to come. We had 50 seats for doctors at the college of medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. There was 100 in Manitoba, a similar province in terms of size and profile. So part of our platform was that we were going to get to 100. This isn't the only answer but our focus has been on the front line.