

Saskatchewan Advantage snags torch from Alberta

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If you have been wondering where the heck the so-called Alberta Advantage has gone -- as it seems so many of us have of late -- here's the answer: to Saskatchewan.

We're not talking specifically about the advantage that automatically comes with being an emerging global energy superpower. Or the fiscal options that come with not having a provincial debt. Or, for that matter, the benefit of having billions of dollars of royalty revenues to spend any way your premier's little heart desires.

No, what we're talking about is the psychological advantage that comes with knowing that you are living in one of the greatest jurisdictions in the world; that the future looks infinitely brighter than the present (which ain't too shabby itself) and that everyone wants a part of you. Or for that matter, to be you.

That was, you might recall, how we felt a few years back. When \$100 a barrel oil was still a pipe dream. And when we still believed the Alberta Advantage -- a quirky combination of economic precepts, geographical location and psychological beliefs -- made us "special."

Unfortunately, it's not a term you hear too often these days around the province. Certainly not in Edmonton or Calgary. Or, for that matter, in Fort McMurray.

But it is how our neighbours in Saskatchewan feel as their economy lifts off; their quality of life remains something Calgarians and Edmontonians can only envy; and their premier travels across North America extolling the virtues of his province to obviously appreciative audiences.

By comparison we're stuck in an economic deceleration that is exacerbating -- not mitigating some of our most severe issues -- while raising new concerns about what the province's economy will look like when we've finished "readjusting."

That tale of two provinces -- and two premiers -- was clearly on display this week at the Global Business Forum, where Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach and Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall both took to the podium to talk about their respective provinces.

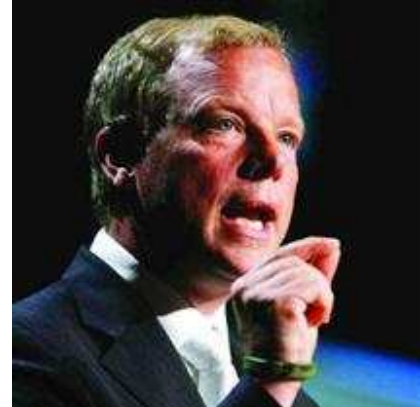
Stelmach spent very little time Thursday extolling the traditional Alberta Advantage perhaps in part because it has dissipated in direct proportion to our population and economic growth.

He spent even less time talking about the oilsands (our future economic bread and butter) perhaps because doing so would raise the spectre of the myriad of public relations and environmental issues that have descended on both the oil industry and the government.

The Alberta premier did spend a fair bit of time talking about his desire to add value to various sectors of the provincial economy, something he appears to care about a great deal, and about reminding the gathered business and political decision-makers that our province remains an attractive place for future investment.

For those of us who have seen our premier in action previously, it was vintage Stelmach. Earnest. Not too wide ranging. And generally less than enthralling. Not exactly the kind of speech that draws an audience to its feet.

When Wall took the stage less than 24 hours later, it was a different story. All that was missing were the fireworks, rock music and perhaps, Sarah Palin.



CREDIT: Grant Black, Calgary Herald
Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall, at the Global Business Forum in Banff on Friday, says a list of economic accomplishments is building confidence in the future of his province.



CREDIT: Grant Black, Calgary Herald
Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall is promising innovation as his province enjoys a resource-fuelled surge.

Just kidding.

The Swift Current native quickly grabbed the audience's attention by reeling off a list of his province's economic accomplishments, not the least of which are the prognostications from a variety of economic think-tanks that Saskatchewan will have the best performing economy in the country for the next year and perhaps even the next three years.

They'll lead the nation in retail sales. And in percentage gain in exports. Earnings will be 15 per cent to 20 per cent above the industrial average.

I could go on. But you get the message.

Ditto for their enviable roster of resources: uranium, potash, oil, oilsands, one half the arable acreage in the nation.

"There's a lot of confidence in Saskatchewan right now," Wall said before launching off on a preview of the even better things -- economically speaking -- he believes lie ahead. Achievements that, ironically, aren't a whole lot different than what Stelmach hopes to bring about in Alberta.

In fact, his main goal is to develop a "one-two" economic punch that takes the pressure off the province's exploding resource sector through "innovation."

Sound familiar?

In fact the irony of ironies is that the "advantage" Saskatchewanians are crowing about these days is all too familiar to Albertans. We have led the nation in economic performance repeatedly. We have been one of North America's premier retail sales leaders for years. We have led the nation in per capita income. And in real estate price growth. We are one of the few jurisdictions in North America that has no sales tax. And of course, we have the oilsands.

The price for those accomplishments, however, was a

super-accelerated growth rate that basically undermined the non-economic tenets of the Alberta Advantage and left us struggling to rebalance ourselves in the middle of a global economic constriction.

What remains unclear is whether we can regain that advantage when the dust clears.

One thing we know for sure: over in Saskatchewan they are going to make as much hay as they can, economically speaking, while the sun shines.

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