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MANDRYK: Brad Wall's privatization agenda remains unclear

BY MURRAY MANDRYK, THE LEADER-POST FEBRUARY 13, 2013

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Premier Brad Wall's privatization agenda hasn't ever been very clear.

There again, maybe those with a "clear" vision on what shouldn't be privatized have been the problem.

Privatization shouldn't be determined by the partisan views of either the "SOS Crown" or the right-wing business types - both of whom have a vested interest in either seeing every job/service provided by taxpayers or seeing potentially profitable opportunities in the hands of private "entrepreneurs".

The problem, however, is that Wall is hardly a dispassionate observer, either. And even Wall - who cut his political teeth in the privatization-mad Grant Devine government of the 1980s as a ministerial assistant to the privatization minister - recognizes this has long been a big political problem for both himself and his Saskatchewan Party.

For this reason, Wall, has always been exceedingly cautious on privatization. Upon becoming Sask. Party leader nine years ago, he decreed the Crown corporations were not for sale and supported the former NDP government's public ownership act, Wall has made specific commitments not to privatize money-losing and under-utilized services like the Saskatchewan Transportation Co., or money-making and well-utilized services like publicly owned liquor stores.

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Of course, that isn't exactly a formula for a consistent policy - a growing concern now that an emboldened Wall seems willing to dabble in privatization.

The latest example was last fall's pronouncement that the next three liquor stores to be built in the province (two in Saskatoon and one in Regina) would be private ones - a policy that has morphed into a pronouncement that the government is now out of the business of building liquor stores. Pressed on this by reporters last week, Wall clarified that this doesn't necessarily mean any public liquor stores in need of replacement would automatically become private ones.

However, Wall also coyly suggested any change to policy would be presented to the voters, and didn't exactly rule out doing so in the next election.

Another example is last fall's news of the privatization of Information Services Corp. (ISC) - a Crown entity created by the NDP after the privatization fight of the late 1980s, but one left out of the public ownership act of 2003.

Puzzling in this move, however, is why the Sask. Party government would think the out-dated technology and Saskatchewan-specific system of tracking land titles of ISC necessarily makes it a good candidate for privatization. There again, there are times when Wall seems to be itching to privatize something.

Even more puzzling is why the government isn't pursuing entities that might be good candidates for privatization.

One such puzzler is SaskTel International - seldom in the headlines, unless for the wrong reasons. In fact, the last time you likely heard about SaskTel International was last year's purchase of a \$75,000 platinum sponsorship of the World Congress on Information Technology in Montreal, which did not even include registration and other expenses for attending.

For a company that made only \$2.6 million last year, one can only wonder about the benefit of a sponsorship level equivalent to IBM, Cisco and Blackberry and in excess of Bell and Dell. The justification given was the exposure opportunity for sales, but a SaskTel official said no identifiable sales have yet arisen out of this contract and that there have only three new, smaller-scale, clients in the last year.

A big problem with Crown-run entities is the penchant for the leadership to think it's running a bigger entity than it actually is. SaskTel International really has only about a dozen clients and a large portion of its revenue is derived from a single client - Century Link, which provides high-speed internet services. As such, SaskTel International might actually be a good candidate for privatization - especially given that its staff often comes from Sask-Tel secondments and there would be relatively little job displacement.

Right now, we really don't know. So as opposed to incremental privatization attempts when the political opportunity presents itself, perhaps the Wall government needs to be slightly more open. Perhaps it should conduct an inventory of government assets to see which - if any - privatizations makes sense.

Right now, the privatization agenda is rather ad hoc.

Mandryk is the political columnist for the Leader-Post.

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