

Sustaining Environmental Reform

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Water should not be free, Reform Party founder Preston Manning told reporters after presenting at a sustainability conference in May 20.

"It is so fundamental, that's why it should be priced because you can't afford to not conserve it," said Manning. "Our society recognizes value when price is attached to it, we may regret that and say it shouldn't be, but that's what is."

He suggested the Alberta government starts by measuring and metering every drop of water in the province and then attach a price.

"There will be a huge argument about what's the right price, but start with something, start with 0.1 cents a litre just to say to people it's not unlimited and it's not free," he said to a 100-person audience at the Cochrane RancheHouse.

While pricing systems are a great mechanism for allocating resources efficiently, they do not address inequity issues, said Manning.

"My argument is, don't not address the efficiency and conservation problem because you don't know what the answer is to the equity problem," he added.

Pathways to Sustainability conference organizers asked Manning to speak about how to get citizens more engaged in sustainability issues. Creating momentum around an issue that is already generating interest is one way to "jolt" people out of their apathy toward sustainability issues, said Manning.

"If you would ask me that next big idea has something to do with sustainability, in particular economic and environmental sustainability," said Manning, explaining it's been about 10 years since the last grassroots stirring in Alberta.

"How do you sustain an economy in a province that's very heavily dependent on a nonrenewable resource? How do you marry a genuine concern with the environment with the requirements for economic growth in such a way that is sustainable?" he said.

Interest in democracy seems to ebb in Alberta, Manning said.

"By focusing on sustainability you are focusing on the right theme, at the right time, in the right province," said Manning who believes he can make a bigger difference training future conservative leaders through his Manning Centre For Building then throwing his own hat into the political ring.

In order to engage the public more in democracy Manning said it's good to start with something people are unhappy about such as that which is unsustainable.

"It's easier to get Canadians to be against something, then for something," he said. "There will always be some people who are utterly indifferent to your cause... sometimes shock therapy can bound people into your camp."

Another type of organizing is issue campaigns run by a coalition of people or organizations that normally disagree, but in this case can agree on a handful of core issues.

"The objective is not to get someone elected, but to get your issue higher in the public opinion polls than they would have been otherwise," said Manning, adding these campaigns are inexpensive at the community level.

Relationship building and genuine democratic discourse with the public are the two key ingredients, said Manning. In Manning's estimation, gone are the days of issue campaigning around carbon tax.

"I believe in pollution pricing, but whoever attached the word "tax" to that concept made a fundamental communications mistake, the public hates taxes," Manning said, explaining he thinks the blunder has set the issue back a decade.

As for Alberta's conservative government, there's no philosophical reason conservatives can't be in favour of conservation, as the words come from the same root.

"This concept of living within your means, which is the heart of fiscal conservatism, can just be extended to the ecology . . . but there's been a slowness there on any conservative government to grasp that, let alone champion it," said Manning.