

Preston Manning wants government to be a facilitator



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“Government as Facilitator” was the theme of a [two-day conference](#) in Ottawa this week, where Preston Manning laid out his vision for the modern role of the state. The event attracted senior ministers from the Harper government and the thinking elite of the Conservative Party.

Manning tells us that “Government as Facilitator” is about government that focuses on creating the conditions in which private and voluntary sector organizations, communities and individuals can achieve their goals more effectively. Moreover, it is a distinctively “conservative” approach to government.

What should we make of this? Does the facilitator metaphor clarify government’s role? And, if so, is it a distinctively conservative view? Let’s start by asking what a facilitator does.

Facilitators are used when people have a shared interest or problem they want to discuss, but feel they may not be able to do the job on their own. The facilitator is a trusted, third party who helps the participants focus and exchange ideas, frame issues, set priorities, make tradeoffs and, ultimately, arrive at a shared view and a plan of action.

So facilitating is an active and engaged role. Facilitators interact with the participants and provide a special kind of leadership. They bring the parties together and help them mobilize around a common interest. Now consider how Manning describes the facilitator role for government:

At the provincial level...it means stepping away from the old concept of the welfare state where the government assumes responsibility for almost everything...It means enabling other agencies in society – NGOs, social enterprises, for profit service companies, faith groups, and communities – to perform a bigger role in social service...Or to further illustrate, “facilitating economic recovery,” means...for example, keeping taxes low, reducing regulatory burden, and negotiating favourable trade agreements and tax treaties with other countries...

For our purposes, two things seem noteworthy in this account. First, there is very little here that seems distinctively conservative. Does any political party really think government should “assume responsibility for almost everything?” No, the real debate between parties is about where the right balance between action and inaction lies.

As for helping the voluntary sector play a bigger role, “social innovation” is a big and blossoming movement in democracies around the world, which is doing just what Manning proposes: experimenting with new ways to support and enable the not-for-profit sector to achieve social-policy goals. What Manning didn’t mention, however, is that Liberals, NDP, the Bloc and Greens are all big supporters of this movement.

Well, what about Manning’s comment on “facilitating economic recovery?” Perhaps this sounds like something distinctively conservative. Except, few people today disagree with the idea of lowering taxes, reducing regulations or promoting trade. The real disputes are over where, when and by how much.

This brings us to the second point about Manning’s description. Oddly, the act of facilitating seems conspicuously absent from it. Indeed, Manning makes government look rather disengaged from the citizens and stakeholders whose interests it is supposed to be facilitating, as though the task were something government did alone, somewhere inside an organizational silo.

This is especially strange given that there are lots of good examples where governments are deeply engaged with stakeholders and communities in ways that look very much like a facilitator.

Consider Prime Minister Jean Chretien’s Team Canada trade missions, launched back in 1994. The government brought business elites together and used its good offices to facilitate a conversation among the leaders themselves, as well as between them and other governments. At the time, this was a new role for government in promoting trade.

If we want a more current example, look at work under way on Foreign Credentials Recognition. New pan-Canadian standards are needed in hundreds of occupational areas to assess the qualifications of new Canadians. Setting these standards requires a huge amount of discussion within the various trades and professions.

The federal government, in particular, has played a key role by convening such meetings, facilitating discussion and communicating the results to stakeholders across the country, thus using its resources and position to help the stakeholders formulate new, pan-Canadian occupational standards. This work began under the Liberals, but continues under the Conservatives.

Finally, let’s return to the example Manning seems on the verge of giving, that of social innovation. Governments of all stripes are using their influence, authority and resources to convene voluntary organizations and help them form new networks and alliances, partner with government in the delivery of social services, and raise capital in new and entrepreneurial ways. Here too, governments are acting very much as facilitators.

So where does this leave us?

Manning seems right that governments are playing a new role as a facilitator and that this change is important. On the other hand, his view that this role is distinctively conservative seems unconvincing. Why does he think it?

I think Manning is blurring two roles that need to be separated: government as a facilitator and government as a partner. We've seen that government can facilitate a discussion on, say, social innovation. This should be distinguished from any decision it might make to play a role in the plan that results. For example, it may agree to use some of its own resources to help get the work done. When this happens, it becomes a partner.

Partnership is a different role from facilitation and it is where the real ideological issues surface. Political parties will have very different views on how deeply, if at all, government should become engaged in the projects that result from discussions it facilitates.

Such differences of opinion are real and legitimate and a conservative like Manning will want to sharply limit partnerships. That is fine, but we should not confuse them with issues around government's role as a facilitator. If we do, we risk losing what is fresh, innovative and promising in the concept. Still, if Manning is doing so, he performs an important service by putting the facilitator concept in the spotlight.

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