

Op-Ed: Top 10 public policy stories of 2013

BY DAVID MITCHELL, OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 22, 2013



Nati Harnik/the associated press

Photograph by: Nati Harnik, AP

Scandals, embarrassments and political machinations may well have eclipsed the serious policy and governance issues of 2013. But looking beyond the hyperbole and absurdity, the Public Policy Forum has identified the following top 10 Canadian policy stories of the year.

10. Pensions reform and retirement security

Discussions escalated on the pressing need to adapt our country's public and private pension plans to a new demographic reality. We can't escape the juggernaut of an aging population moving rapidly toward retirement, often with inadequate financial means to sustain living standards. The year-end federal-provincial stalemate on reforming the Canada Pension Plan strongly suggests that this issue will continue to be top-of-mind for policy-makers.

9. Federal Job Grant Program

Announced in the federal budget, the Job Grant Program led to new strains in the Canadian federation on an important human capital issue. Premiers responded angrily to the federal initiative, which proposes to fund skills training directly from money already flowing to provincial programs. A rare intervention by the federal government to co-ordinate national policy contributed to a serious and unresolved backlash.

8. CETA agreement-in-principle

In October, Prime Minister Stephen Harper signed an agreement-in-principle for a Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA) between Canada and the European Union. After several years of negotiations, this tentative agreement marks what could become the most significant trade initiative for Canada since NAFTA.

7. Charbonneau Commission

Rarely does a public inquiry both captivate the general public and have dramatic impact. The Charbonneau Commission into corruption in the management of public construction contracts in Quebec resulted in criminal charges against government officials and the forced resignations of mayors in Laval and Montreal. In the process, it vividly exposed a deep-rooted culture of corruption in the province.

6. Senate under the microscope

The long-running expenses scandal in the Senate of Canada has so far resulted in the suspension of three senators and the departure of the prime minister's chief of staff. More important, the affair has prompted a re-evaluation of the role and legitimacy of the Canadian Parliament's upper chamber at a time when the federal government has asked the Supreme Court to rule on how the institution can be reformed or abolished.

5. Devolution and the Northwest Territories

With a final agreement signed this year, the Northwest Territories is poised to assume "province-like" responsibilities, with devolution of lands and resources from the government of Canada. Following the Yukon, which achieved devolution a decade ago, and with Nunavut now seeking control of its natural resources, this agreement signals the growing role and influence of the northern territories as full members of the Canadian federation.

4. BC-Alberta rapprochement

During a testy period when British Columbia seemed increasingly isolated, Premier Christy Clark declared the province didn't need Alberta (or Canada?). Since her surprise election victory, however, there has been a change of heart, with Clark declaring B.C. and Alberta "best friends."

3. Intergovernmental co-operation in times of crisis

The year was marked by devastating disasters, both natural and human-made. The responses to the terrible floods in Alberta and the horrific train derailment in Lac-Mégantic were characterized by effective and well-co-ordinated relief efforts by local, provincial and federal governments. This prompts an important question of governance: why are crises necessary to inspire such impressive collaboration?

2. The rise of "economic diplomacy"

A report released in Ottawa at the end of November declared that "all diplomatic assets of the Government of Canada will be marshalled on behalf of the private sector." The federal government's new Global Markets Action Plan entrenches the concept of economic diplomacy, rebalancing Canada's role as a neutral arbiter and champion of human rights in favour of trade-based development and foreign policy.

1. No decision on Keystone XL

In 2013 a decision was expected by President Barack Obama on the proposed Keystone XL pipeline,

which would link Alberta's oilsands to refineries in the U.S. Despite the lobbying efforts of Canadian politicians and business leaders, the year ended with no decision in sight. This has had a significant impact on a major driver of the Canadian economy. As a result, more oil is now being transported by rail and discussions of a west-east Canadian pipeline connection are ongoing.

For these reasons, the lack of an American decision on Keystone XL is the top policy story of the year in our country.

David Mitchell is the President and CEO of the Public Policy Forum.

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen