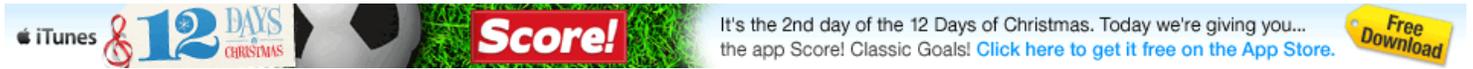


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Opinion: Northern Gateway tops the list of 2012 public-policy stories

By David Mitchell and Ryan Conway, Special to the Sun December 26, 2012

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This year vividly demonstrated the complexity and interconnectedness of public policy in our country. Here is the Public Policy Forum's top-10 list of Canadian public-policy stories of 2012.

1 Northern Gateway dispute

Environmental and energy policy issues are complicating the proposal to build an oil pipeline to the Pacific coast. And the tensions between British Columbia and Alberta have, for now, put an end to the previous optimism over policy collaboration in the New West Partnership.

The Northern Gateway dispute makes clear the growing complexity of Canadian public policy. The western stalemate has even inspired discussions of new west-east energy linkages in Canada, revealing the national implications of regional discord. And that's why the Northern Gateway dispute is the top public-policy story of 2012.

2 Decisions on foreign ownership of natural resources

The federal government approved the proposed takeover of Nexen by China's CNOOC and Progress Energy by Malaysia's Petronas, with Prime Minister Stephen Harper indicating that this is "not the beginning of a trend, but rather the end of a trend." The decision signals a new approach to foreign investment policy. In particular, takeovers by foreign state-owned enterprises in Alberta's oilsands will now only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

3 Provinces out in front with a new generation of leaders

Increasingly, provincial and territorial governments have taken the initiative on issues like energy, health and immigration. A new generation of leaders, including a record number of female premiers, is beginning to transform the shape and direction of policy priorities in the Canadian federation.

4 Trade diversification

Canada continues its push away from dependence on the U.S. market. With entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the continuing negotiations over a Canada-EU trade agreement and a flurry of agreements with developing countries, Canada has clearly set its sights on overseas markets.

5 Uncertainty over F-35 fighter jets and military procurement

The federal government's decision to purchase F-35 fighter jets was a policy highlight of our list in 2010, representing the largest military contract in Canada's history. Now, with escalating costs and critical reports, Ottawa is rethinking the controversial sole-source purchase and re-evaluating government procurement processes and strategies.

6 Quebec Spring?

The rapid rise of extra-parliamentary activism in Quebec in 2012 reshaped our ideas of how citizens engage with their governments. Sparked by a student protest over tuition increases, this burst of activism grew to include other issues and ultimately contributed to the downfall of the Liberal government and the return to power of the Parti Québécois.

7 Costly corruption

Quebec continues to struggle with corruption-related challenges. Since first making our list in 2010, this has become an even bigger issue in the province. Damaging revelations unearthed through investigations and a commission of inquiry have begun to claim political casualties. Resignations of the mayors of Montreal and Laval demonstrated the seriousness, extent and cost of this deep-rooted problem.

8 A leaner public sector

The role and cost of government went under the microscope in 2012. Public services across the country saw freezes and cuts, and governments continued to re-evaluate their core mandates. The federal government set the pace, eliminating approximately 10,000 positions. The debate over the most efficient and effective size of government continues.

9 Diminished role of legislatures

The relevance of Canada's parliaments, at both the federal and provincial levels, was called into question in 2012 by a series of initiatives met by relative indifference. Despite prorogations, prolonged adjournments, unwieldy omnibus bills and conflicts with accountability officials, the overall importance of legislatures seems diminished.

10 Public finance envy

Our strong public finances were envied internationally in 2012, building upon Canada's global reputation for sound financial management. But have we been too successful for our own good? As some countries seek to emulate Canada, others prefer to poach the secrets of our success (Happy New Year and good luck, Mark Carney)!

David Mitchell is president & CEO and Ryan Conway is project lead at Canada's Public Policy Forum.

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