

## **A year of game changers**

By David Mitchell, the Ottawa Citizen

It has been a year full of politics — maybe fuller than many Canadians would have preferred. But what were the public policy highlights of 2011? There were in fact numerous important decisions or initiatives that constitute potential “game changers” for our country. Here, in descending order, is the Public Policy Forum’s Top Ten List of Canadian policy stories of the year:

### 10. B.C. rejects the HST

At the end of the summer, British Columbians voted in a landmark referendum, rejecting the Harmonized Sales Tax. The implementation of the tax had been badly botched by former premier Gordon Campbell. Its reversal and the return to a provincial sales tax create new and unwelcome fiscal pressures for B.C. In addition, other Canadian governments have now grown more fearful of exercises in direct democracy.

### 9. Abolition of the Wheat Board’s monopoly

The Conservative government moved ahead with its election commitment to end the Canadian Wheat Board’s monopoly on selling the grain produced by Canadian farmers. In spite of opposition in the House and from some quarters of the agricultural community, who have argued that the government was required to consult farmers directly before taking such action, the legislative changes are proceeding — subject to judicial review.

### 8. Abolition of the long-gun registry

Fulfilling another election promise, the Conservative government also introduced legislation to scrap the federal long-gun registry. Supported by those who view the registry as both expensive and ineffective, the legislation also fuelled criticism and opposition, led by the province of Quebec, over the decision to destroy all records gathered to date.

### 7. The Afghan and Libya missions

2011 saw the end of Canadian combat operations in Afghanistan, the longest military engagement in Canadian history. As the exit for the Afghan mission commenced, Canada’s military joined in the NATO efforts to intervene in Libya, based on the international doctrine (Responsibility to Protect — R2P) earlier advanced by Canada.

## 6. The 'tough on crime' bill

In September, the Conservative government introduced a sweeping new law advancing several criminal justice initiatives such as new mandatory minimum sentences. With heated criticism from legal and corrections communities that the measures are unwarranted given falling crime rates, the federal government also faces opposition from some provinces expected to share the costs of prison expansion.

## 5. Innovation consensus

2011 was a year of numerous new reports and analyses on Canada's innovation deficit, including a new Science, Technology and Innovation Council benchmarking report and technology executive Thomas Jenkins' review of federal support for R&D. Along with a surfeit of provincial, private sector and civil society initiatives, there's a clear consensus on the problems. Enough is enough! It's now time to end the analysis and move toward action.

## 4. Towards a Canadian energy strategy

The year also saw the slow but steady emergence of a consensus on the need for a co-ordinated Canadian energy strategy. Led initially by NGOs and the private sector, the pressing need for more effective co-ordination was addressed by federal and provincial energy ministers at their summer meeting at Kananaskis and has now been further advanced by new Alberta Premier Alison Redford.

## 3. Provincial governments respond to natural disasters

Disastrous floods in Manitoba and Quebec and wildfires in Alberta and Ontario were managed during the summer months by provincial public services, sometimes aided by the Canadian military. The responses were prompt and in most cases very effective, vividly demonstrating the changing nature of public service delivery: dealing with the real needs of citizens on the ground and in the community.

## 2. The year of incumbency

2011 was a year of an unprecedented number of Canadian elections at all levels of government. Incumbent governments were re-elected federally and in Ontario, Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. In striking contrast to democracies elsewhere in the world, Canadians appeared satisfied with the direction of their governments.

## 1. Shipbuilding contracts awarded to Nova Scotia and B.C.

In October two massive federal shipbuilding contracts were announced: \$25 billion to Irving in Halifax for naval and coast guard vessels and \$8 billion to Seaspan in Vancouver for service and non-combat ships. In addition to representing major financial boosts for both provinces, the contracts were also noteworthy for a procurement process decided by merit rather than politics. A potential political

minefield was avoided by relying on the sound and dutiful work of the public service — and that's why this is the top Canadian public policy story of 2011.

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