

Good and bad among 2011's top public policy stories

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B.C.'s rejection of the HST is No. 10 on the Public Policy Forum's list.

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 10 List of Canadian policy stories of the year:

10. B.C. rejects HST

In August, it was announced that British Columbians, in a landmark referendum, had voted to reject the harmonized sales tax. The implementation of the tax had been badly botched by former Liberal 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 Canadian 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 of Commons 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 legislation became law Dec. 15 despite being challenged in the courts.

8. Abolition of long-gun registry

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

7. Afghan and Libya missions

The year saw the end of Canadian combat operations in Afghanistan, the longest military engagement in Canadian history. As the exit for the Afghan mission began, 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 faced opposition from some provinces expected to share the costs of prison expansion.

5. Innovation consensus

The year saw 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 research and development. 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 (non-government organizations) 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, Alta., and has 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

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The year saw 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 B.C., Nova Scotia

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 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 - that's why this is the top Canadian public policy story of 2011.

David Mitchell is president and CEO of Canada's Public Policy Forum, an independent, not-forprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of government through enhanced dialogue among the public, private and voluntary sectors.

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