

Setting policy priorities for Canada

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This week's Throne speech lays out the government's five priorities for the next legislative term and, in some respects, provides a vision for the medium term. But, given the government's minority situation (and the fact that an election may be in the offing) those priorities were by necessity dictated more by immediate political concerns than by a careful consideration of the relative costs, benefits and long-term effects of particular policies.

Think tanks have the luxury of not needing to win elections, and can thus examine the broad policy challenges facing the country, as well as their potential solutions, from a longer-term perspective. This is exactly what the Institute for Research on Public Policy has done with its pathbreaking Canadian Priorities Agenda project, which brought together 45 of Canada's top policy minds to develop a medium-term policy roadmap for Canada. The project is unique in its effort to evaluate policy proposals across a wide variety of economic and social policy areas within a consistent analytical framework.

The central theme of the project is scarcity of resources and the need for choice. The everyday reality for policy makers is that governments have limited means—be it revenue, manpower or political capital—at their disposal and must choose carefully which policies to pursue and which to leave behind.

The project also focused on the economic and social well-being of Canadians, so some policy issues (most notably national security and foreign policy), while clearly important, were essentially off the table by design.

The project unfolded in three phases. First, a group of distinguished agenda setters helped us identify Canada's most pressing policy challenges. Then, renowned experts put forth and defended three specific proposals that would most effectively address each of the challenges in question. Finally, a panel of six judges—whose views span the political spectrum—each chose from among the 24 proposals on offer a package of five policies that in his or her view would be the most likely to enhance Canada's economic and social well-being.

The judges' choices are fascinating and should provide food for thought to all political parties as they ponder the content and direction of this week's Throne speech. Two broad themes came through strongly. First, environmental policy action is urgently needed. There was a widely-held view that Canada must move past the sterile debate over whether we can or should meet the Kyoto targets and take concrete actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There were two proposals on the table: a tax on carbon and other air pollutants and a "carbon management standard," an innovative market-based scheme (which differs from the emission trading system mentioned in the Throne speech) that mimics the incentive effects of a carbon tax without the political difficulties of increasing government revenue. Five of the six judges chose one or the other for inclusion.

Also at the top of the judges' minds was the need for a natural resources conservation plan to address the knowledge gaps with respect to how much natural capital we have, how rapidly it is disappearing and what parts of it are most in need of protection. While the Throne speech offers a handful of initiatives to protect specific areas, a more global approach to assessing risk is necessary to ensure environmental sustainability.

The second broad theme was that governments must take a more active role in early childhood development, for both economic and social justice reasons. Three of the six judges included publicly-subsidized child care among their choices, and two others were also supportive of the idea but wanted to see more provincial experimentation before opting for a particular design. Overall, the judges preferred a program that would target vulnerable children rather than the universal approach favoured by the previous Liberal government. But by the same token, they do not consider the Conservative government's approach of giving cash directly to parents an effective way to assure quality child care for those who need it most.

It is also noteworthy that one of the major planks of the Throne speech—getting tough on crime—did not figure at all in the CPA project. Evidently, none of the agenda-setters felt that crime and personal security represented a serious policy challenge for Canada, and none of the judges took issue with this assessment.

The essence of good policy-making is the ability to strike a balance between the relative importance of various policy goals, the effectiveness of the instruments on offer and the political feasibility of implementing them. The favoured proposals in the CPA project have the legitimacy of having survived an arduous winnowing-down process—a sort of *Public Policy Idol* as one of our contributors quipped—and are thus worthy consideration by policy makers and politicians alike.

The authors are the co-editors of A Canadian Priorities Agenda: Policy Choices to Improve Economic and Social Well-Being, available for purchase from the Institute for Research on Public Policy (www.irpp.org). The chapter on which this article is based can be downloaded free of charge.