



El reform, or not

It's been a summer in which Canadians have talked about — what else? — the weather. Rain in the east, and heat waves in the west. Not exactly seasonal weather for the summer barbecue circuit.

The summer's political agenda was set at the end of the last parliamentary session when Stephen Harper and Michael Ignatieff agreed, for the time being at least, not to hold an election over employment insurance reform. That was a relief.

Among government entitlements and transfers, perhaps only equalization is more complex and difficult to explain than EI, but it seems there are two EI issues that could come to a head when the House resumes later this month, perhaps leading to a fall election, perhaps not.

One, should there be a national standard for qualification for benefits, or regional variations from Atlantic to Pacific, as is the case now? And two, should the number of hours worked as a threshold to qualify be lowered, as the opposition parties are demanding? And if the political answer to both of the above is Yes, where will the money come from? This is a treasury matter, and thus a question of confidence.

So in this issue, several of our leading writers on economics and fiscal frameworks take a timely look at EI reform. To lead off the conversation, IRPP Research Director Jeremy Leonard throws some cold water on the whole debate, and has the numbers to support his contention that EI "has been unfairly maligned as ineffective in responding to the 2008-09 recession." For their part, Contributing Writer and IRRP Senior Fellow Tom Courchene and John Allan of Queen's University look at the whole menu of EI benefits, and suggest the discussion leads to the need for a guaranteed annual income. IRPP Chair Janice MacKinnon, a former finance minister in Saskatchewan, looks at the issue and the law of unintended consequences. For example, the present regional standards discourage labour mobility.

Elsewhere this month, we offer a wide range of articles on timely and sensitive issues. To begin,

Réformer l'assurance-emploi ?

Le principal sujet de conversation des Canadiens cet été ? La météo, bien entendu. La pluie qui a sévi dans l'est du pays et les vagues de chaleur de l'ouest. Pas vraiment l'idéal pour la saison des barbecues.

Pour ce qui est du programme politique estival, Stephen Harper et Michael Ignatieff l'avaient fixé au terme de la dernière session parlementaire en convenant que, dans l'immédiat, il n'y aurait pas d'élections sur la réforme de l'assurance-emploi. Ce qui a soulagé tout le monde.

Parmi les paiements et transferts gouvernementaux, seule la péréquation est plus complexe et plus difficile à expliquer que l'assurance-emploi, mais deux questions récurrentes que soulève ce programme pourraient resurgir en force dès la reprise prochaine des travaux du Parlement et provoquer le déclenchement d'élections automnales, quoique...

Première question : doit-on préférer des normes nationales d'admissibilité aux variations régionales appliquées actuellement de l'Atlantique au Pacifique ? Et la seconde : doit-on abaisser le nombre d'heures de travail donnant droit aux prestations, comme le réclament les partis d'opposition ? Mais si, politiquement, la réponse à ces deux questions est sans doute oui, d'où viendra le financement ? C'est là une affaire de trésorerie, et donc sujette à un vote de confiance.

Ce numéro est donc principalement consacré à la réforme de l'assurance-emploi, un enjeu brûlant analysé par certains de nos meilleurs experts en matière économique et financière. Jeremy Leonard de l'IRPP lance le débat en remettant les pendules à l'heure, soutenant, chiffres à l'appui, qu'on a « injustement décrié l'inefficacité de l'AE pendant la récession de 2008-2009 ». Tom Courchene et John Allan dressent le portrait des prestations d'AE et proposent un revenu annuel garanti. Enfin, Janice MacKinnon, présidente du conseil d'administration de l'IRPP et ancienne ministre des Finances de la Saskatchewan, examine ce programme sous l'angle de ses effets indésirables, notant par exemple que les critères régionaux découragent la mobilité de la main-d'œuvre.

Contributing Writer Geoff Norquay walks us through the history of the nuclear reactor at Chalk River, leading up to its shutdown and the current critical shortage of medical isotopes, especially for cancer patients. There is no back-up reactor anywhere in the world, to make up for the shortage. Then Susan Delacourt and Alex Marland look at the retail side of politics, putting party brands and leaders into three categories posited by Jennifer Lees-Marshment — products, sales and marketing. Of the three, marketing is by far the most sophisticated, and it is also closest to where the voters are.

Contributing Writer Robin Sears checks in with a read on the Ontario Conservative leadership race, in which front-runner Tim Hudak ultimately prevailed. Can Hudak rejuvenate a “tired old party” in time for the 2011 election? Jeremy Kinsman, our lead foreign affairs writer, offers an analysis of the election in Iran, and the subsequent summer of turmoil in a nation held hostage by mullahs. In a piercing analysis that sees both parallels to and differences from the first Iranian revolution in 1979, Kinsman considers the turmoil in Tehran. Millions of Iranians felt cheated of their votes, and took their grievances to the street and to the rooftops. The mullahs and the Revolutionary Guard responded with a crackdown that has included show trials of foreign journalists and dissenting Iranians. The implications for the world economy and global security go even beyond the concerns for local democracy. Iran has oil, and it’s working on building a nuclear weapons capacity.

In the first of a series leading up to next summer’s G8 summit in Canada, *Muskoka 2010*, career diplomat Colin Robertson looks down the Road to Huntsville, and suggests an agenda for the Canadian presidency of the G8, from climate change to trade policy. As the chair of the G8, Robertson observes that Canada has an opportunity “to apply our talent and engage on a broad canvas of issues with a range of countries.” In a sense, the preparatory work begins with this month’s Harper-Obama bilateral at the White House, followed by the G20 hosted by President Obama in Pittsburgh. Muskoka will be a part, and perhaps the culmination, of a policy continuum. In our new department, *The Economy*, McGill’s Karl Moore and Bill Polushin look at six types of Canadian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and suggest what they need to be world competitive in these challenging times.

In a *Letter from Vietnam*, Daniel Veniez considers how capitalism is practised communist-style from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon. Finally, in our *Verbatim*, we offer Barack Obama’s truly remarkable speech at Cairo University, which could represent a turning point in America’s relations with the Islamic world, as well as a new beginnings for the Middle East process.

Nous consacrons par ailleurs plusieurs articles à d’autres sujets d’actualité. Tout d’abord, Geoff Norquay retrace l’historique du réacteur nucléaire de Chalk River, dont la fermeture a provoqué une pénurie d’isotopes médicaux pour traiter les personnes atteintes de cancer, une situation d’autant plus critique qu’aucun autre réacteur ne peut prendre la relève. Susan Delacourt et Alex Marland traitent ensuite de la dimension « commerciale » de la vie politique, classant l’image de marque des partis et de leurs chefs selon les trois catégories définies par Jennifer Lees-Marshment — produits, ventes et marketing —, celle du marketing étant de loin la plus complexe et la plus susceptible d’influencer les électeurs.

De son côté, Robin Sears analyse la campagne à la direction du Parti conservateur ontarien, finalement remportée par le meneur Tim Hudak. Saura-t-il régénérer ce « vieux parti défraîchi » à temps pour le scrutin de 2011 ?

Quant à Jeremy Kinsman, il revient sur les élections iraniennes et la tourmente qui a ébranlé tout l’été ce pays pris en otage par les mollahs. Il livre une pénétrante analyse des parallèles et différences entre la première révolution iranienne de 1979 et les troubles qui ont agité Téhéran par suite des élections de cet été. Et parce que l’Iran est riche en pétrole et s’affaire à développer ses capacités nucléaires, s’ajoutent au défi démocratique des enjeux stratégiques liés à l’économie et à la sécurité mondiales.

Dans le premier article d’une série baptisée *Muskoka 2010*, qui se poursuivra jusqu’au sommet du G8 dont le Canada sera l’hôte l’été prochain, le diplomate de carrière Colin Robertson propose un ordre du jour qui va des changements climatiques aux politiques commerciales. À titre de président du G8, observe-t-il, le Canada a l’occasion « de faire valoir ses talents et d’inciter de nombreux pays à discuter d’un vaste éventail d’enjeux ». Dans une certaine mesure, les préparatifs de ce G8 commencent ce mois-ci avec la rencontre bilatérale Harper-Obama à la Maison-Blanche et la réunion du G20 qu’accueillera le président américain à Pittsburgh. Dans notre nouvelle section *L’économie*, Karl Moore et Bill Polushin examinent six types de PME canadiennes et les moyens qui favoriseraient leur compétitivité mondiale en ces temps difficiles.

Depuis l’autre bout du monde, une *Lettre du Vietnam* signée par Daniel Veniez décrit comment, de Hanoï à Hô Chi Minh-Ville (anciennement Saigon), on apprête le capitalisme à la sauce communiste.

Enfin, notre rubrique *Verbatim* reproduit le discours remarquable prononcé par Barack Obama à l’Université du Caire, qui pourrait bien marquer un tournant dans les relations entre l’Amérique et le monde islamique de même qu’un nouveau départ pour le processus de paix au Moyen-Orient.

possibilities

Q&A: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO INTEROPERABILITY

The complex task of getting people, systems and IT to work together seamlessly in mixed IT environments is an important priority, and challenge, for Canadian governments and for governments around the world.

Possibilities, a Microsoft Canada publication dedicated to celebrating innovative achievements and fostering thought-leading discussions with the public sector, sat down with Theresa Pardo and Brian Burke from the Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany, SUNY, to discuss their most recent research on interoperability in government.

Q: What is interoperability?

Theresa Pardo: Interoperability is often associated with technology, but it's also about management and public policy. We know, for example, that the technology that enables the sharing of individual health records already exists. But from a regulatory or legislative perspective, the freedom to actually share that data is still limited. So if a government wants to pursue electronic health records or any other initiative that requires interoperability, it must first have the appropriate policies in place.

Q: In your most recent research, you refer to interoperability as an "intense struggle." Why is it so difficult for governments to achieve?

TP: There are several reasons. The first is resource allocation. Agencies or systems can't connect to each other if there is no money in their budgets to support a broader interoperability agenda, and government budgets don't necessarily account for the co-mingling of spending and priorities. Generally speaking, there are no resource allocation models in place that actually support the kind of tasks that have to be carried out to create truly interoperable policies, practices and technologies.

Brian Burke: Another hurdle is getting leaders, whether in government or the private sector, to understand that the work that they do plays a critical role in making interoperability possible. Too often they'll say "the IT shop can't seem to get this major business process implemented across six agencies" when it's not an IT problem to begin with. It comes down to the people: the front-line managers, policy makers or agency executives. Finally, interoperability can be difficult to measure in traditional terms. Interoperability "wins" are not the kind of initiatives that traditionally get talked about in a press release. I think this is another challenge.

Q: What's at stake? Why is it important to get interoperability right?

TP: Interoperability leads to a government worth having, a government that operates at a new level and demonstrates very visible benefits to its citizens. This is an important factor, as people increasingly expect the government to offer immediate and seamless services, similar to Amazon.com or eBay. We're already seeing results: look at New York, for example, where a business can apply in one place for all the permits they require from various labour and liquor boards. That's an example of something that has a tangible benefit for citizens.



Interoperability also touches things the citizen doesn't see directly, such as improving emergency response or public safety capabilities, or giving governments the ability to track vendors in a more informed way and ensure that the contracting practice is transparent. These are the kinds of initiatives that increase the value of government in the lives of citizens.

Q: Can you point to some success stories?

TP: The criminal justice system is a great example, where the ability to share information across multiple criminal justice organizations and, therefore, improve public safety is quite evident. You see it as well in public health, in responding to disease outbreaks like the West Nile virus.

Q: Are there any in Canada?

BB: Service New Brunswick, a one-stop portal for citizens who need information or a service from the provincial government, is a successful example of providing citizens with services they need, and it has everything to do with interoperability. New Brunswick has done customer satisfaction surveys and found that citizens are very satisfied with their government. That is a direct result of interoperability.

Q: How do government executives go about solving the interoperability challenge to create more of these successes?

BB: As we said earlier, you can get there when an executive recognizes the need to create a truly interoperable government. During the initiative to combat the West Nile virus, for example, the commissioner of Public Health who led the project basically said to all of the state agencies, "You will work together to make this happen." It was amazing what happened as a consequence of that statement, and it's a great example of the kind of executive leadership that made it possible for agencies and local governments to come together in a new way and create a capability that didn't exist before.

For additional information about interoperability, visit www.microsoft.ca/interop

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