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Ottawa Community News

How federal politics touched us this week

OTTAWA — Endless applause rained down on the Olympic athletes who flooded the floor of the House of Commons this week — an indication, surely, of the pride that MPs of all political stripes feel for their country and its ability to shine.

It was a sustained moment of common purpose in the middle of a week that was notable for its intensity. The federal Liberals were on the defensive, both for their fundraising practices and also for blazing a fiscal path that shows no end to deficits.

But they countered with some serious policy: immigration measures, a new infrastructure plan, foreign investment changes, loan guarantees for Newfoundland's Muskrat Falls project and the naming of enough independent senators to give that new group of free-thinkers a plurality in the upper house.

Here are three ways politics affected Canadians this week:

IMMIGRATION

The government has announced its immigration targets for 2017. Despite extensive pressure to increase levels and indications from ministers that it would happen, Canada aims to take in 300,000 newcomers next year — the same as 2016, although slightly more than the levels we saw under the Conservative government.

The mix of newcomers will be different. Ottawa foresees significantly higher numbers of economic immigrants — a seven per cent increase — and more family reunification. By bringing in more highly skilled workers and giving the provinces a bit more scope to hand-pick them, the federal Liberals are tipping their collective hat to businesses struggling to deal with skills shortages. And allowing more family reunification is always good retail politics.

The increases come at the expense of refugees and protected persons. This year, with the influx of Syrians, Canada brought in 55,800 in this category. Next year, it is expected to fall to 40,000.

There are two challenges holding Ottawa back from raising immigration levels right away: the financial and human-resource cost of integrating larger numbers of people, and a desire to avoid stirring up anti-immigrant sentiment.

But it's worth noting that Finance Minister Bill Morneau also this week announced new measures to dramatically speed up the processing of work visas for high-growth companies. He also eliminated the need for permits for short-term contracts.

SECRETS

In a week of outrage at police forces in Quebec for spying on journalists through their smartphones, it turns out they weren't the only authorities drawing down private data on Canadians. The Federal Court ruled late Thursday that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service has been illegally gathering electronic information on Canadians who posed no risk whatsoever to public safety. For 10 years.

The improperly retained material was metadata — information associated with a communication, such as a telephone number or email address, but not the actual messages. The court ruling raised concerns that the data trails would draw in friends and family members of surveillance targets, even if they were not under suspicion themselves.

CSIS said the practice would stop immediately. But the opposition NDP is now calling for a better explanation from the government, tougher oversight of CSIS and a complete withdrawal of the Conservatives' C-51 security legislation.

SOCIAL HOUSING

In a heftier-than-usual fall fiscal update, Morneau highlighted a longer-term, more substantive and more innovative plan for infrastructure. Instead of \$60 billion over 10 years, we will see about \$100 billion over 11 years. Roughly a quarter of that is for social infrastructure, for projects such as affordable housing. The government hopes to leverage that amount substantially by setting up a bank that lures in pools of private capital.

But the bulk of the federal funding is set to flow towards the end of the 11-year time frame. In the meantime, Morneau argues, Canadian families will see plenty of benefits from the federal government as previous initiatives kick in — tax cuts to the middle class, enriched child benefits, and previous commitments to infrastructure.

Indeed, social infrastructure will see about \$1.7 billion in funding next year from measures taken in Budget 2016 — funding that Morneau argues will not only house more struggling families but also create jobs.

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