

Judge the Parties by This Scorecard

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Former Prime Minister Kim Campbell didn't actually say during her ill-fated 1993 campaign that an election is no time to talk about serious policy issues. But legions of candidates since have behaved as if that's exactly what they believed. Pretty soon we'll be talking about which oppressor role in *The Handmaid's Tale* Andrew Scheer is best suited for, whether Jagmeet Singh's poll numbers are better with his hair down or up and what really is appropriate attire for state visits to foreign countries.

But before we get carried away in the advancing tidal wave of trivial obsessions, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation has done us all the service of providing a list of 19 policies — 19 for 2019, I guess — it would like to see parties endorse. For many readers of this page, a good way to judge the parties will be by how they score on this list, which I fear offers the highest ratio of good sense to word count that we'll encounter in the next six weeks.

Even so, it's not perfect.

Item 1, a plan for the debt: Here we are at the top of the economic cycle yet Ottawa is undoing the hard fiscal slogging of the 1990s by still running a deficit. With a recession coming — and a recession is coming: no one knows when but only fools think we're beyond recessions — it's almost too late to get fiscally ready. But having resources ready for when the economy does sag is a main reason for deficit hawkishness.

A core spending review (2)? Given the incessant growth of government, we should be trimming all the time and one in 20 dollars is hardly grinding austerity. Ending corporate welfare (3) and scrapping the media bailout won't actually produce much money but "there's not actually much money there" has been a get-out-of-jail-free card for hundreds of dubious spending items and was a recipe for the federal fiscal chaos of 1970-95.

"Ensure pipelines get built" (5) is easier said than done. We do have an independent judiciary, after all, and the government doesn't decide which cases it hears. But the eastern- and western-most parts of this country need to achieve reconciliation with the truth that fossil fuels will be with us for many decades to come.

Switching public-sector workers to defined contribution pensions (6) won't be easy. But if they insist on the great privilege of defined benefits, let their salaries reflect that. Simplifying the tax system (7) is another Sisyphean task but too many of our brightest young minds are becoming tax lawyers. Simplifying the tax code would help end this awful human waste.

If we're going to do something about carbon, and it seems a political inevitability that we will, a carbon tax (8) is the most efficient intervention. But we should definitely use its revenues to cut income taxes (9) and other taxes on productive activity. The Liberals would have a hard time doing this, since a main pledge of their past campaign, one they did follow through on, was to raise top rates. But even they might think about raising the incomes at which top rates kick in, so as to go a little easier on the upper-middle-class and those working hard to join it.

Tax-on-tax for gas (10) seems second order of smalls. Escalator taxes (11) don't strike me as a big scandal, either: measures to maintain the real value of taxes are generally just that. "No new sugar or fat taxes" (12) isn't as good as "No new

taxes, period” but, as a general rule, though people should be free to preen about their own virtue on such issues if they want to, they shouldn’t be free to stick their hands in other people’s pockets while doing so.

As for medical cannabis (13), is that really still around now that regular cannabis is legal? I’m a consumption tax zealot: tax it all, with no exemptions, since exemptions create administrative havoc. But drugs with scientifically proven — emphasize “proven” — medical benefits, OK maybe.

First Nations transparency (14), yes. Ending omnibus legislation (15), yes, though the current government was big on that while in opposition yet quickly learned how useful omnibuses are for hiding things (is that you in there, SNC-Lavalin?). A 15a, shorten the federal budget, would also be useful.

Recall legislation for members of parliament (16)? I’m not so sure. Never-ending campaigning, which this would lead to, hasn’t served the U.S. well. If an MP betrays constituents’ trust in a truly important way, they’ll remember all the way to the next election. (If we do go for recalls, I’d add 16a: make byelections cheaper.)

I’d amend 17, about access to information, to allow culling of trivial or vexatious requests, which take up lots of time of lots of bureaucrats, and I don’t know for a fact that (18) the Parliamentary Budget Office and auditor general are inadequately funded. They do regularly irk governments, which is good. Lifting limits on the frequency with which the AG can report might be better.

Finally, limiting what governors general receive after they’ve left office won’t raise much money (though see 3, above) but it does make an important statement. At bottom, the populist revolt is about unfairness and the belief that some people and businesses have privileged access to public funds. Governors general are well

compensated while serving and get nice pensions once they're done. That and the nation's gratitude should be enough.

Now: Over to you, parties.

See next article post for The Pre-Election Wish List

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