

Old Law A Hurdle To New Roads

'Mish-Mash'; Tories eye change to environmental legislation

James Cowan, National Post
Monday, January 12, 2009

A century-old piece of legislation that frequently stalls construction projects will be among the laws the Conservative government will target for revision as it attempts to infuse billions of dollars into Canada's lagging economy.

Faced with a recession, Jim Flaherty, the Finance Minister, likely will announce stimulus measures in the budget on Jan. 27. At the same time, the Conservatives will pursue changes to environmental assessment laws and other regulations that delay infrastructure projects once they receive funding.

"There's a lot we can do -- whether it's statutory, regulatory, processes -- that can speed up getting shovels in the ground," said John Baird, the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, in an interview yesterday.

"We have a lot of rules in place to stop bad things from happening, but little in place to facilitate good things."

The federal government is already committed in 2007 to spending \$33-billion over seven years on roads, public transit and other infrastructure projects.

Among the laws earmarked for revision is the Navigable Waters Protection Act, which was enacted in 1882 to regulate the construction of dams and bridges and guard marine routes from intrusions by the logging industry.

The law has been revised over the years, but Mr. Baird said its antiquated guidelines fail to distinguish between "the tiniest creek and the bridge between New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island."

"It's a piece of legislation brought in the 1800s with, frankly, little benefit but huge regulatory burden that can really slow things down," he said.

Rodney MacDonald, the Premier of Nova Scotia, and other provincial leaders have raised the need to reassess the act. However, potential revisions -- which would streamline the approval process for smaller projects -- have caused concern for environmentalists and boaters.

Discussions are also under way about overhauling the environmental assessment process, which addresses the effect of a project on the surrounding area.

Different assessment standards apply to different projects receiving federal funding, Mr. Baird said.

"It's a real mish-mash, hodgepodge."

Mr. Baird intends to meet on Thursday with the mayors of some of Canada's largest cities to ask them to support measures aimed at reducing bureaucratic delays to infrastructure projects.

Michael Ignatieff, the Liberal leader, has called for increased infrastructure spending in the upcoming budget along with support for individuals affected by the economic downturn.

Stephen Harper, the Prime Minister, told reporters last week that the budget will contain a "big, comprehensive" plan to bolster the economy.

"We are in an unprecedented period," he said on Friday. "We are ready to listen to all the suggestions and we are looking at hundreds of possibilities."

Statistics Canada reported on Friday that 34,000 full-time jobs were lost last month, while the United States shed 524,000 jobs.

"Obviously the figures today are troubling," Mr. Harper said.

"Every time a Canadian loses his job this is something that really does preoccupy us. What I think is more troubling are the figures in the United States, which really do indicate the period of difficulty we are entering in terms of the global economy."

Mr. Flaherty has said the Jan. 27 budget will contain a "substantial deficit."

It is expected the Conservatives will commit at least \$30-million toward retraining workers who have lost their jobs, boosting consumer spending and other initiatives.