Sport and policy. Who cares about policy? Well, it is not such a bad thing to keep an eye on. In fact, there is a great deal of policy-making taking shape across the sport landscape as we speak.

Part of ensuring an athlete-centered, coach-led sport system for Canada means that coaches, like you, insert themselves into the policy-making process. For coaches, this is a kind of public leadership that builds on your natural disposition to lead and to be a central part of decision-making.

One of the primary policy instruments of the federal government – and there are many – is the budget-making process. Each year, when the Minister of Finance tables his budget, he introduces a range of fiscal measures that profile the financial plan for the government in the coming year.

With freshly soled shoes from the local cobbler, Jim Flaherty took his third kick at budget-making on February 26, and the outcomes are worth your consideration.

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The top line theme of the budget — Responsible Leadership in Uncertain Times — received most of the play in the media. A closer examination of the budget unearthed a few other trends:

- A trend towards targeted measures that included specific cuts, specific tax reductions, and specific expenditures. This was not a budget of over-arching policy frameworks or big ideas.
- A trend away from ideologies and towards a kind of 'pragmatism as good government.'
- A trend towards strategic budget reviews, where annual cost savings (read: cuts to the public service and programs) are re-profiled into political priorities

The sport themes in the budget were strong, focused, and reflective of its priority in the government process. As part of its Leadership at Home budget section, the Road to Excellence initiative received a new, ongoing, annual investment of $24M in support of Canada’s summer sport programs, scaling up in 2008 with $8M, 2009 with $16M and $24M thereafter, ongoing. Alex Baumann spearheads this initiative and is on record in describing his #1 priority as coaching. This investment is an unprecedented boost for international sport in Canada and sets us on a long-term path as a country. Given that there were few investments of this kind in this budget, we can call that a sport policy success story.

Other budget measures picked up on the sport theme too, such as a $25M boost to the Vancouver 2010 Torch Relay that will flow in the 2009-10 budget year. This will give the federal government a chance to profile its role in sport from community to community to community, as the torch passes through. Is there a role for coaches in passing along the torch?

Each of Canada’s research councils received a dose of new funds which will provide the Canadian Institute for Health Research and Social Science and Humanities Research Council with a bit of extra breathing room. If you are linked to sport and physical activity research, you may wish to take a closer look at how those resources will be profiled by the research agencies.

Are you struggling with sport infrastructure needs? Facilities? Well, this budget did not do much of anything to help out, at least directly. Indirectly, municipalities (local governments which manage recreation facilities) picked up some longer-term budget assurances given that the Gas Tax allocations have now been made permanent. This takes some of the financial pressure off of cash strapped cities and communities, but it is hard to draw a line between this and the potential of new infrastructure programs related to sport and rec.

Coaches who are working in Aboriginal communities are likely to see a boost in health related program support, given that $1.47M (over two years) has been allocated to the First Nations and Inuit Health Program. Some of our coaches are focused on enhancing Aboriginal health through sport and physical activity, so finding a way to link up with these new approaches, especially in a way that integrates with provincial efforts, ought to be fruitful.

Sport and recreation is increasingly utilized as an alternative crime prevention strategy and some provincial groups (i.e., Sport Nova Scotia) have been quite successful in tapping into this opportunity to make a difference in local communities. If you are involved in sport through programs such as Sport Futures, you may wish to turn your coaching eye to the National Crime Prevention Centre, which received an additional $30M per year for two years as a top-up to its current budget.

Canada leads the way in many parts of the international sport for development system — Commonwealth Games Canada and Right to Play are two examples. A new $50M Development Innovation Fund has been set up. Is sport for development seen as a new and innovative approach to achieving international development objectives abroad?

Addressing the gender gap in coaching ought to feature in the government’s promise to develop an Action Plan on Women’s Equality. This is one area where our coaching leaders — hello, Shelagh Croxon — could really have an impact on government policy making!

Finally, a Statistics Canada Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participating has been saved from the cutting block. Many sport policy wonks played a role in the letter writing campaign to preserve this important data source at StatsCan — important for coaches as the one standardized source for volunteers — and that includes many coaches — information nationwide.

So that is one take on Budget 2008. Take a leadership role and involve yourself in the policy implications of the budget — that is what public leadership by coaches is all about.
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