

Advocacy Update

Huw Williams,
President, Impact Public Affairs

Why Ottawa Should Care

As another parliamentary session comes to a close and MPs head to their respective ridings for the summer, it is perhaps a good time to reflect on the Canadian bookseller's role in our country's economy and society.

Over the past year, booksellers were arguably the target of much consumer frustration, as you tried to bring sticker prices down as fast as you possibly could to reflect the parity of the dollar. It was not easy, but thanks to active member involvement, a strategic public relations message, and a tailored government relations plan, you were able to make Canadians aware of your ongoing efforts. You also managed to communicate constructively with government, including the Minister of Finance himself, that booksellers must work with policy makers to create an environment in Canada which does not disadvantage the book retailer or the book consumer.

As we start laying out CBA's priorities for the upcoming parliamentary fall session, it will be important to emphasize just how critical accessibility to reading material is to the productivity of our country. We will also have to go a step further, and demonstrate the essential role which Canadian booksellers play in offering these educational and mind-opening materials to Canadians.

According to the Conference Board of Canada's 2008 report, Canada has fallen in the ranks when it comes to standards of living compared to the rest of the world—from 4th in 1990 to 9th this year. Factors contributing to our decline include our "B" grade in the Education and Skills category as well as our shameful "D" grade in the Innovation category. Despite popular belief, our population is not considered highly educated and we are not seen as an innovative force in the world.

Specifically, the Conference Board reported that over seven million adult Canadians—or four in 10—do not have the literacy skills necessary to cope with the demands of everyday life and work in modern society.

These alarming statistics surely warrant a review of the current taxation policy on books, as study after study has demonstrated that greater accessibility to reading material leads to a more literate and innovative workforce.

It will also be important for Ottawa to understand the critical role that small businesses, such as independent booksellers, play in shaping and maintaining our delicate Canadian culture. In the wake of the growing influence of global players such as Amazon.com within the Canadian market, we will have to force policy makers to take a stance in the interest of small business and Canadian heritage. To do so, and as suggested by the most recent report issued by the Competition Policy Review Panel, a review and update of the current foreign ownership regulations (especially as they pertain to non-traditional bricks and mortar businesses) is urgently needed.

No one knows at this point if an election will take place in the fall, but it is certainly a strong possibility. With this in mind, we encourage you to pay a visit to your local MP and candidates this summer while they are at their most attentive level. Let them know the extensive impact your independent bookstore has on the community and invite him/ her to take a tour of your business. As a respected retailer, your MP should understand the subtle, yet important influence you have in the community as you come in contact with thousands of his/her constituents throughout the year. This fact alone will open up their ears. So don't be shy, tell them why Ottawa needs to care about Canadian booksellers!

Huw Williams is the President of Impact Public Affairs and handles CBA's lobbying activities in Ottawa. He is co-author of a book entitled A Guide to Government Relations for Directors of Not-For-Profit Organizations, published by the Canadian Society of Association Executives (www.csae.com). Recently, Williams was named as one of the Top 100 Canadian Lobbyists by The Hill Times.