Policy Forum: Independent Platform Costing—Balancing the Interests of the Public and Parties

Scott Cameron*

PRÉCIS
Cet article présente une évaluation de la conception de la méthode d'évaluation indépendante du coût des programmes électoraux au Canada, telle qu'elle a été établie par la Loi sur le Parlement du Canada et les décisions de fonctionnement du directeur parlementaire du budget. L'auteur compare l'équilibre atteint entre servir les intérêts du public et ceux des partis politiques au Canada avec l'équilibre atteint aux Pays-Bas et en Australie. Bien que la législation canadienne tende à être au service des partis politiques, dans la pratique, la culture d'évaluation du coût qui s'est développée lors de l'élection générale de 2019 a élevé le niveau du débat et produit une quantité d'informations comparable à ce que l'on attendrait d'un service conçu pour favoriser le public. L'article se termine par une discussion des options pour étendre le service d'évaluation du coût des politiques pour les prochaines élections.

ABSTRACT
This article provides an evaluation of the design of independent election platform costing in Canada, as established by the Parliament of Canada Act and the operating decisions of the parliamentary budget officer. The author compares the balance struck between serving the interests of the public and the interests of political parties in Canada with the balance struck in the Netherlands and Australia. Although Canada's legislation is tilted in favour of serving political parties, in practice the costing culture that evolved during the 2019 general election raised the level of debate and produced an amount of information comparable to what would be expected of a service designed to favour the public. The article concludes with a discussion of options for expanding the policy-costing service for future elections.

KEYWORDS: ELECTIONS ■ POLITICAL PARTIES ■ PARLIAMENTARY BUDGET OFFICER ■ COSTING ■ POLICY ■ EVALUATION

* Budgeting and Public Expenditures Division of the Directorate for Public Governance, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Paris (e-mail: cameron.scott.d@gmail.com). The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of the OECD or of the governments of its member countries.
INTRODUCTION

Changes to the Parliament of Canada Act in 2017 granted the parliamentary budget officer (PBO) a separate and distinct mandate to estimate the cost of election platform proposals at a party’s request.¹ The 43rd general election in 2019 was the first test of the costing service.

Empowering an independent body to scrutinize campaign promises can serve the interests of both the public and political parties. For the public, an impartial arbiter can increase the amount of policy analysis available and focus the debate on accurate facts so that voters can achieve an election outcome that better reflects their will.² Cementing accurate policy details also sets concrete benchmarks to better hold politicians to their promises in the years following the election so that governments continue to reflect the voters’ will.

Individuals, firms, and markets can also use the information in preparing for policy changes and price-in election outcomes, thereby increasing stability and economic efficiency.³ Additionally, the discipline imposed on parties that are subjected to independent policy scrutiny can combat deficit bias—the tendency of governments to borrow rather than save (although whether that is in the public interest is a subject of debate).⁴

For parties, the main benefit is a levelling of the analytical playing field between non-governing parties and the incumbent government. In the run-up to the campaign period, the incumbent has access to the full resources of the public service,

---

¹ Parliament of Canada Act, RSC 1985, c. P-1, as amended, section 79.21, incorporating changes enacted by An Act To Implement Certain Provisions of the Budget Tabled in Parliament on March 22, 2017 and Other Measures, SC 2017, c. 20, section 128; royal assent June 22, 2017.
² Alan Renwick and Michela Palese, Doing Democracy Better: How Can Information and Discourse in Election and Referendum Campaigns in the UK Be Improved? (London, UK: University College London, School of Public Policy, The Constitution Unit, March 2019).
³ Brian Knight, “Are Policy Platforms Capitalized into Equity Prices? Evidence from the Bush/Gore 2000 Presidential Election” (2006) 90:4-5 Journal of Public Economics 751-73 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2005.06.003).
⁴ Lars Calmfors and Simon Wren-Lewis, “What Should Fiscal Councils Do?” (2011) 26:68 Economic Policy 649-95.
such as career experts working with confidential administration databases and non-public microsimulation models. A policy-costing service gives non-governing parties similar tools, eliminating this incumbency advantage.

For the governing party, creating and using the service can signal the government’s fiscal credibility to voters. It may also allow the incumbent to communicate policy messages with a stamp of neutrality and authority that the public service would be unwilling or unable to provide during the campaign.5

All parties may benefit from the discipline imposed by impartial costing in developing their platforms, since they are forced to make firm and detailed policy decisions sooner rather than later. This can weed out wild politics from the extreme wings of parties and ease consensus building both within the party and across parties when forming coalitions or garnering minority support.6 Parties also benefit financially, requiring fewer consultants, academics, and think tanks to prepare their platforms, and receiving free press coverage each time the budget office posts costings online.

In designing the costing framework, legislators must consider the tension between public interest and party interest. The public is best served when cost estimates are mandatory and transparent, providing the largest information set on which voters can base their decisions and making it available as early as possible. Parties benefit most when estimates are voluntary and confidential, so that they can choose what information they will reveal to the public and when.

The independent public office empowered with preparing platform estimates must walk a political high wire. Serve parties too eagerly and the office’s reputation for being non-political will be threatened. Go too far in defending the public interest and parties may withdraw from the process entirely, or spurn the services of the office in the regular session of Parliament following the election.

With the ballots from the 2019 election now counted, it is possible to evaluate the balance struck by Canadian legislators and the PBO during its first election test. I begin by laying out two precedents, the Dutch and Australian models. I then assess how the Canadian framework compares with its precedents and describe the performance of the PBO in the 2019 election. I close with several options for expanding the costing framework for future elections.7

---

5 The public service typically stays out of the public eye from the time Parliament is dissolved until such time as the government is reconstituted following an election.
6 Edwin van de Haar, “CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis: Dutch (Economic) Policy-Making” (2015) 10:2 Contemporary Social Science 182-90 (https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2015.1052540).
7 I acknowledge here my role as one of the architects of the Canadian framework. I worked at the PBO from 2012 to March 2019 and had no role in the implementation of the framework during the campaign period that began June 23, 2019.
THE BALANCE STRUCK BY THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE

The Dutch Model

The Netherlands’ Centraal Planbureau (CPB) (Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis) is an offshoot of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation, with operational independence. In 2018, the CPB had a budget of €17.1 million and employed 117 full-time staff. It began to perform the role of independent election platform evaluator in 1986 at the request of the legislature’s three biggest parties.

All political parties holding at least one seat in the Dutch House of Representatives may submit their platforms to the CPB voluntarily. The office publishes an assessment of the platforms before each election in a document called Charted Choices. Nearly all parties participate. In the most recent 2017 election, 11 parties submitted their platforms and Charted Choices assessed 1,165 potential policy measures, or an average of 106 for each party.

The scope of the CPB’s analysis has expanded far beyond financial costs to include a full range of welfare analysis (for example, distributional and gender analysis, environmental impacts, and educational outcomes) and a full range of macroeconomic feedback (dynamic scoring), including a policy’s impact on short- and long-run employment, innovation, household disposable income, and purchasing power. The scope has been expanded at the request of political parties, which use the bureau’s analysis of social and economic outcomes to attract their targeted voters.

Kraan argues that the high rate of participation and the broad scope of the service is the result of “typically Dutch” politics and culture. Dutch government relies on fragmented multi-party coalitions, in which weak finance ministers are normal. Policy is made through lengthy bottom-up negotiation and consensus building. The parties rely on Charted Choices to construct coalition agreements to govern, aided by a negotiator picked by the Crown. Nearly all (as high as 95 percent) of the finalized measures are pulled from Charted Choices, and the agreement is returned to the CPB for a final costing that will constitute the new government’s fixed four-year expenditure framework.

Kraan reports that parties participate because they fear

---

8 See the Netherlands’ country profile in the independent fiscal institutions database available on the website of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): www.oecd.org/governance/budgeting/oecdnetworkofparliamentarybudgetofficialspbo.htm.

9 Van de Haar, supra note 6, at 186.

10 Centraal Planbureau (CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis), Keuzes in Kaart 2018–2021, Charted Choices 2018–2021, Chapter 1 and 2, the Headlines (The Hague: CPB, 2017) (www.cpb.nl/sites/default/files/omnidownload/Charted-Choices-2018-2021.pdf).

11 Dirk-Jan Kraan, “Typically Dutch” (2005) 4:4 OECD Journal on Budgeting 103–25.

12 Wim Suyker, Hoe Sterk Is de Samenhang Tussen Regeerakkoord en de Doorgerekende Verkiezingsprogramma’s? [How Strong Is the Correlation Between Coalition Agreement and the Costed Election Manifestos?] (The Hague: Centraal Planbureau [CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis], January 2013), at 7.
being labelled as economically irresponsible and being left out of negotiations more than they fear a negative assessment.

Charted Choices results in nuanced and evidence-based debates among a sophisticated electorate that embraces the analytical framework of the CPB and engages in good faith, acknowledging the tenuous underpinnings of the broader calculation effort, but nonetheless viewing the results as the most credible numbers around which to make decisions.13

On paper, the CPB’s model is somewhat balanced between public and party interests. Submitting platforms for Charted Choices is voluntary but not confidential. If a party chooses not to engage, its proposals will only be estimated and will be published post-election only if the party forms part of the government and its policies directly enter the coalition agreement. However, in practice, Dutch political culture shifts the balance of the CPB’s service conclusively toward the public interest, with virtually all parties participating and an astonishingly comprehensive array of analysis supplied to voters.

The Australian Model

The Australian federal PBO was created in 2012 as a parliamentary department, headed by a statutory officer reporting to the president of the Senate and the speaker of the House of Representatives. In 2018-19, the office had a budget of AU$8.6 million and employed 40 full-time staff.14 The office and its role in electoral platform costings were born from a hung Parliament under the terms of a confidence-and-supply deal demanded by the Australian Green Party and three independent members of Parliament (MPs).15

The PBO inherited responsibility for costing proposals from the Department of Finance, which was required to cost opposition party proposals upon request during the four to six weeks before an election. The Department of Finance was charged with the duty by the Charter of Budget Honesty in 1998, following a large deficit revision and perceived financial deception during the preceding election campaign. Smaller opposition parties considered this first framework to have had several failures: it was initially offered only to the two major parties; the window was too short for any back-and-forth discussions; requests had to go through the Prime Minister’s Office and could be accessed through freedom-of-information applications; the final estimates were not confidential; and there were suspicions of bias in favour of the governing party. All parties continue to have the option of going to

13 Van de Haar, supra note 6, at 187.
14 See Australia’s country profile in the OECD’s independent fiscal institutions database, supra note 8.
15 Robyn Munro and Akash Paun, Pre-Election Policy Costing Mechanisms in Australia, Whitehall in Year Five of the Coalition: Lessons from Elsewhere (London, UK: Institute for Government, March 2014), at 2.
the Department of Finance during the campaign period, and this option has been exercised by the incumbent.16

Use of the PBO’s costing service is extended to all MPs. The PBO estimates only the financial impact of policies. Fulfilled requests are confidential during the regular parliamentary session but must be published if requests are made during the campaign period. Parties have shown an overwhelming preference to have platform commitments costed during the confidential parliamentary session.

The Australian PBO is required to draft a post-election report that includes a compulsory assessment of the fiscal impact of each party’s full platform. On the day before the election, parties are required to submit a written list of their public announcements. The PBO may also use its discretion to add policies if it feels that the list is incomplete. The report is released after the election, so as not to influence the outcome, but with the intention of holding parties accountable for their promises and encouraging them to be transparent during the campaign. The post-election report tips the balance of the Australian costing process squarely toward the public interest, with the PBO acting as what van de Haar calls “election police.”17

The legislatures of two Australian states—New South Wales and Victoria—have also created PBOs with platform-costing mandates, adopting models similar to the federal PBO. Notably, the PBO in the state of Victoria will prepare an optional pre-election report at a party’s request.18 This report examines the entire suite of policies chosen by the party for its platform and estimates interaction effects and overall budgetary balance implications. In both states, parties have the option of going to the Department of Treasury and Finance, as is the case at the federal level.

**STRIKING THE CANADIAN BALANCE**

The Canadian PBO, created in 2006 and beginning operations in 2008, has 40 staff with a budget in 2018-19 of $7.6 million.19 The mandate to cost elections was added neither as a response to a multi-party consensus demand to assist coalition forming, as in the Netherlands, nor following an episode of fiscal mismanagement or a failure of a departmental costing service to satisfy party needs, as in Australia. Rather, the service was conceived unilaterally by advisers to the governing Liberal Party of Canada after observing two particularly heated disputes during the early days of the 2015 general election.20

---

16 Ibid., at 13.
17 Van de Haar, supra note 6, at 186.
18 The State of Victoria, Parliamentary Budget Office, Report of PBO Operations for the 2018 Victorian General Election (Melbourne: PBO, March 2019).
19 Canada, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2018-19 Report on the Activities of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer (Ottawa: PBO, June 2019) (www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca/web/default/files/Documents/2018-19_PBO_Annual_Report_EN.pdf).
20 Based on my personal communications with persons familiar with the matter.
1. Canada’s two best-resourced parties (including the Liberal Party) attacked a third party for the cost of its commitments, floating their own assessments of its platform before they had even released platforms of their own.

2. The Liberal Party’s claims surrounding the number of beneficiaries of its proposed children’s benefits program were challenged by the Opposition, dragging the non-partisan Library of Parliament (which had provided the numbers) into the fray in contravention of its policy of reticence when Parliament is dissolved.

These disputes highlighted the need for an independent arbiter of platform promises who could speak when Parliament was dissolved. Creating such a role complemented the Liberal platform commitment to “fair and open government,” adopted to contrast the party with an incumbent that had been accused of being secretive. The resulting legislation, part of the Parliament of Canada Act, is characterized by the following:

- All parties or independent MPs with representation in the House of Commons at the start of the campaign period (defined as the period that begins 120 days prior to the election) may voluntarily submit requests to have the PBO cost their proposals.
- Measures are to be assessed individually, not as platforms. That is, the legislation does not prescribe that the PBO will estimate the aggregate fiscal impact of a party’s combined measures, including overall borrowing and debt profiles.
- The scope of the PBO’s analysis is limited to a policy’s financial cost.
- Analysis can be provided confidentially; however, the PBO is required to publish a completed costing if (1) a party publicly announces a measure that it asked the PBO to cost and the party has not withdrawn the request, and (2) the party submits written notification of the announcement to the PBO. Parties are required by the legislation to provide written notification if a policy that was requested has been publicly announced, but there is no defined time period in which to do so and no enforcement mechanism should a party fail to comply with this requirement.

One element of Canada’s legislation is a significant departure from both the Netherlands and the Australian models: The PBO’s estimates are not based on the government’s official economic- and fiscal-planning assumptions, nor will they be used to plan the budget following the election. Owing to past institutional decisions, the PBO’s economic and fiscal models are independent from those of the Department of Finance. In the Netherlands, the CPB’s costings, forecasts, and

---

21 Liberal Party of Canada, *Real Change: A New Plan for a Strong Middle Class* (Ottawa: LPC, 2015) (www.liberal.ca/files/2015/10/New-plan-for-a-strong-middle-class.pdf).

22 Supra note 1.
assumptions directly underpin the government’s official medium-term framework. In Australia, the PBO does not do its own economic and fiscal forecasting; its costings use the government’s official economic and fiscal assumptions. Although the Australian PBO’s costings may differ from official estimates during the election period, they are eventually reconciled in the post-election report. In Canada, voters can only roughly compare campaign platforms with the most recent budget of the incumbent government and the first budget of the new government.

Canada’s legislation leaves some areas of discretion to the parliamentary budget officer, particularly the practical details of how the PBO will engage with parties, the breadth of considerations that the PBO’s analysts may use to determine financial costs, and the information that the PBO provides to Canadians in revealing how costs were determined. In laying out the policy-costing framework, the parliamentary budget officer set himself the objective of “enhancing public confidence in the election process.”

However, he was constrained in his decisions by the wording of the law surrounding financial costs and the uncertainty of how the inaugural costing facility would play out. He therefore opted for a risk-management approach characterized by the following:

- The PBO would not publish distributional, gender, or sectoral analysis in arriving at financial costs.
- The PBO would adjust its estimates for the behavioural response of taxpayers and beneficiaries if the evidence base was robust, but would not provide dynamic scoring (that is, it would not adjust the underlying economic assumptions of a costing to include the impact of a policy on factor markets and economic growth). A common example of dynamic scoring is a corporate tax cut that partially pays for itself by reducing the cost of capital, spurring investment, and raising output.
- Although the legislation intended that measures would be assessed individually, the PBO would allow parties to request that cross-platform interactions be considered on a case-by-case basis. For example, if a party proposed both to expand a taxable benefit and to decrease the personal income tax rate, it could elect to have these policies assessed together to capture the interaction between the two. The PBO would assist parties by flagging any potential interactions as requests were received.
- The PBO would distribute its analytical resources equally among all parties and independent MPs in the House of Commons, regardless of the number of contested seats, using pre-announced resource limits for analyst hours and pecuniary expenses (which would be applied only if the analysis required costly external data).

23 Canada, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, Evaluation of Election Proposal Costing 2019 (Ottawa: PBO, January 2020), at 3 (www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca/web/default/files/Documents/Reports/ADM001/ADM001_en.pdf).

24 Ibid.
While the legislation allowed the PBO to seek the assistance of federal departments in carrying out its campaign mandate,\(^\text{25}\) the PBO would give parties the option to forbid its collaboration with the public service if they were concerned that measures would be leaked to the incumbent or that the public service was biased. The PBO also opted not to disclose to the public whether assistance was provided or whether costings were handled by departments.

The PBO would have structured meetings with each party as each costing was submitted and as it was finalized, in order to give parties the opportunity to prioritize, revise, or withdraw the request before publicly announcing the policy.

Although the PBO would not cost overall platforms or endorse the platform costings of others, it would help parties to prepare their own platforms by publishing its economic and fiscal baseline before the campaign period, along with tools to calculate the overall impact of new measures on interest expenses, the budgetary balance, and public debt.

The balance of Canada’s costing framework is tipped in favour of the interests of parties. Parties are in control of what the public does or does not see during the campaign. They have full discretion to use a PBO costing, to use their own estimates, or to announce measures uncosted. Further, there is no post-election mechanism for the PBO to serve as the election police, as in Australia. Finally, by focusing only on financial costs, forgoing broader welfare analysis, the costing framework leaves a gap in important policy information relevant to voters.

However, judging from the experience in the Netherlands and Australia, the practical culture that arises during the costing process can be a far greater factor in determining whose interests are ultimately served.

**WALKING THE HIGH WIRE: DID THE PBO TRAVERSE IT OR TUMBLE?**

By all accounts, Canada’s first experience with independent costing was a success. The process fell quickly into the rhythm envisioned by the framers: A party would announce a platform commitment, and journalists and election watchers would rush to the PBO’s website to view the details and costs, generating a flurry of commentary. Academics and think tanks compared the estimates with their own calculations, and the level of methodological detail that the PBO provided allowed differences to be resolved.

Before the campaign, most stakeholders were reluctant to embrace the idea of independent platform scrutiny; the former parliamentary budget officer and at least one politician were particularly outspoken.\(^\text{26}\) But in the end, the five most

\(^{25}\) It signed memorandums to this effect with five departments.

\(^{26}\) Marie-Danielle Smith, “Parliamentary Budget Officer Raises Concerns Over ‘Restrictions’ in Liberal Bill, Says Wasn’t Consulted,” *National Post*, April 12, 2017 (https://nationalpost.com/...
prominent parties (the Liberal Party of Canada, the Conservative Party of Canada, the New Democratic Party of Canada, the Green Party of Canada, and the Bloc Québécois) submitted a combined 216 requests, of which 115 were published—that is, roughly half of the requests submitted to the PBO were ultimately announced in platforms.27

While participation was high, coverage fell short of that reported in the CPB’s Charted Choices and the Australian PBO’s post-election report. The Canadian PBO estimates that it assessed only half of the measures that parties announced (with the remainder either assessed by parties’ advisers themselves or left uncosted). Further, no independent MPs and neither of the leaders of two parties with lone representatives participated.28

Parties were also inclined to relegate transparency to the PBO’s website, publishing fewer policy details in their own campaign material than they provided to the PBO.29 Comparing platforms from the 2019 election with platforms from the 2015 election, it is somewhat inconclusive whether the exercise pushed parties to be more transparent themselves, but three of the five main party platforms showed some increase in detailed financial information. That said, there was a demonstrable expansion of information available to the electorate directly from the PBO.

Because the PBO did not provide full platform evaluations, the process left a role for traditional consultants and think tanks to pull the PBO’s estimates together and calculate fiscal aggregates. All of the parties that showed the bottom-line fiscal impact of their platforms did so using the PBO’s pre-election economic and fiscal baselines, and most parties used the PBO’s tool to calculate public debt charges.

The structured meetings between the PBO and parties during a proposal’s costing played an important role in encouraging participation. The option to prioritize requests so that they could be timed with announcements and to revoke requests and go back to the drawing board after seeing the costs was exercised by parties and was a crucial consideration in their decision to participate.30

At the beginning of the legislated 120-day campaign period, the PBO allotted 2,600 hours of analyst time for each party. The system for deducting analyst time

27 Supra note 23, at 5.
28 Eligible parties with lone representatives that did not participate included the People’s Party of Canada and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation.
29 This tendency was noted by stakeholders in the tax consulting industry; see, for example, KPMG LLP, “Post-2019 Election—Possible Tax Changes,” Tax News Flash Canada no. 2019-43, October 22, 2019 (https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/ca/pdf/tmf/2019/ca-post-2019-election-possible-tax-changes.pdf).
30 Supra note 23, at 5, and my personal communications with persons familiar with the matter.
for requests as they came in had growing pains, with some parties questioning their deductions. The resource restrictions were a risk-mitigation tool and were ultimately abandoned once the PBO had a sense of the workload and felt confident that it could meet the demands of all parties over the remaining campaign period. This did not stop some parties from using the resource constraints as an excuse for submitting only a subset of their measures to be costed—an argument that does not seem to be supported by evidence.31

All parties ultimately submitted written notification of a policy’s announcement; however, some did so simultaneously with announcements, in the spirit of the legislation, while one (the incumbent party) exploited a legislative grey area to withhold written notification so that it could publish costs all at once closer to the election. It is difficult to say whether the governing party found a strategic advantage in exploiting the ambiguity in the legislation, but other parties were concerned with what they perceived as gaming the system.32

It is difficult to determine conclusively whether the new process and information available helped the party that won a plurality to garner sufficient minority support to form a government. However, the new government appears to have borrowed elements of tax and national pharmaceutical coverage proposals from other parties, and it may have been aided in doing so by having the costs at hand from the PBO.

An unexpected windfall from the framework was that it improved relations between the PBO and the public service, which had suffered from a decade-long dispute over information access. The process created new formal and informal data-sharing arrangements, particularly between the PBO and the Department of Finance, Employment and Social Development Canada, and Statistics Canada. The process also strengthened the PBO’s relationships with parties and their policy communities. A legacy of the platform-costing process could be better analysis from better data access and more interest from parties during the regular parliamentary session.

The campaign period was not without stumbles. As expected, the stickhandling of cross-platform interaction effects proved challenging, requiring some cost estimates to be revised and republished without a clear system of version control. For example, the cost of the Conservative Party of Canada’s maternity and parental leave tax credit was revised following the subsequent announcement of a personal income tax rate reduction, leading to some confusion as commentators juggled multiple versions of cost estimates.

Many proposals that parties included in platforms were changes to discretionary spending envelopes requiring no cost estimate—for example, investing $15 million annually in reducing gang violence or reducing international assistance by $1.5 billion annually. Others were aspirational measures without firm details to cost, such

31 Supra note 23, at 8-9, and my personal communications with persons familiar with the matter.
32 Lucas Powers, “Trudeau Not Acting in ‘Good Faith’ on PBO Platform Costing, Economist Says,” CBC, September 19, 2019 (www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-pbo-costing-platform-1.5289127).
as finding $750 million in new revenues by investing in tax enforcement. The PBO anticipated requests to cost such measures and communicated to parties that it would not accept them. However, the decision was reversed during the campaign, and the PBO published some discretionary-spending and tax-enforcement targets on its website, with the caveat that it had made no attempt to verify their validity. The change in policy was communicated unevenly across parties, and some questionable proposals were given an unintentional stamp of authority. This led to public confusion and resentment among parties at the inconsistent treatment.33 In Australia, the PBO will not accept such requests during the campaign period but will publish them in its post-election assessment of entire platforms, provided that the policies are sufficiently detailed.

Although the parliamentary budget officer was not meant to cost or endorse overall platforms, he came dangerously close to doing so by complimenting one party’s extensive use of the costing facilities and the firm footing of its platform in a round of media interviews given in the week before the election.34 This caused concern and frustration among some other parties, which felt that he had erred in wading into politics.35

Overall, the tightrope was deftly walked, tilted as it was to serving parties. But importantly, the culture that developed around the costing process proved a counterbalance to shift the process toward the public interest. Fully costed platforms by most major parties were published well ahead of voting day, generating considerable discussion in the press and commentariat. The level of public debate was indisputably raised.

THE FUTURE OF PLATFORM COSTING IN CANADA

The 2019 general election costing process demonstrated both the PBO’s analytical prowess and the will of participants to act in good faith. With considerable concerns quelled and uncertainty resolved, the PBO and legislators may now opt to broaden the framework or adjust the balance between party and public interests. Here are a few options to do so.

- Expand the scope of analysis. Restricting policy analysis to financial cost leaves a vacancy in information available to the public and gives the incumbent an ongoing advantage, with its access to the public service supply of social, economic, and environmental analysis to sell its platform to voters. Legislators and the PBO could offer this breadth of support to all parties, borrowing a

33 Based on my personal communications with persons familiar with the matter.
34 BNN Bloomberg, “Conservatives Have the Least Uncertainty Attached to Their Platform: PBO” (www.bnnbloomberg.ca/economics/video/conservatives-have-the-least-uncertainty-attached-to-their-platform-pbo-1802890).
35 Based on my personal communications with persons familiar with the matter.
page from the Netherlands, and at the same time expand the information set available to the electorate. The PBO has already indicated that it will provide distributional analysis in the next election and that it does not feel that legislative changes are necessary to do so.\textsuperscript{36} If the PBO moves to expand the scope of its analysis, it may benefit from an innovation that both Australia and the Netherlands have implemented to assist the calculation effort: the creation of an advisory council of academics, practitioners, and other outside experts that helps to improve analytical models and build public trust in them.

- **Offer optional pre-election reports.** To resolve the difficulties of capturing cross-platform interactions when costing individual measures, the PBO could offer parties the chance to request pre-election platform reports, like those prepared by the Victoria state PBO in Australia. These reports would offer parties the chance to volunteer to have their complete platforms evaluated, including interactions between measures and the bottom-line impact on the budgetary balance and public debt. The process should include a single cutoff date for all parties and MPs submitting platforms, and reports for all participants should be published at the same time. The PBO could also include a scenario that constrains the costings and aggregate platform assessments to the official Department of Finance economic and fiscal-planning assumptions, so that voters can compare platforms with official past and future budget plans.

- **Offer confidential services during the regular parliamentary session.** The first parliamentary budget officer decided that the office would not offer confidential analysis to parliamentarians during the PBO’s normal mandate, insisting instead on leading by example on openness and transparency. The latest changes to the Parliament of Canada Act codify this philosophy in law. But this leaves a gap in the resources available to parliamentarians that conventional PBOs are meant to fill. Non-governing parliamentarians currently have no confidential mechanism for exploring financial proposals outside the campaign period, except through the Library of Parliament, which does not have comparable resources or powers of information access devoted to budget research. Nor should budget expertise be replicated in two parliamentary offices; the PBO is required by the Parliament of Canada Act to cooperate with the Library of Parliament “to avoid any unnecessary duplication of resources and services.”\textsuperscript{37} With the expanded resources that the PBO has been given to carry out its campaign mandate, it could offer confidential fulfilment of costing requests outside the campaign period. This could be accomplished either by amendment of the Parliament of Canada Act or through an operational agreement with the Library of Parliament to share the PBO’s analytical resources in fulfilling confidential requests through the library. Allowing parties

\textsuperscript{36} Supra note 23, at 7. Others (including myself) disagree, feeling that the language of the Parliament of Canada Act is clear: The PBO is to estimate only the direct financial costs of policies.

\textsuperscript{37} Parliament of Canada Act, section 79.12.

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3642742
to access confidential costing advice throughout the parliamentary schedule would reduce the workload during the campaign period, potentially allowing the PBO to remove resource limits.

While these options appear to primarily support the interests of parties rather than the public, the experience in the Netherlands shows that the two are not mutually exclusive. With the right costing culture and incentives, an equilibrium can emerge where parties participate in the platform-costing service to the fullest extent possible and thereby ratchet up the transparency of campaign promises to the public.

Broad platform analysis by designated public authorities such as PBOs, fiscal councils, and planning bureaus is an idea whose time has come. Belgium and Latvia both tested the waters in 2019, largely following the Netherlands model, albeit with a reduced scope. There have also been calls to implement the service in the United Kingdom and Ireland, and the Netherlands hosted a conference in November 2019 on the topic, generating considerable interest from abroad. No matter the high wire that Canada’s PBO is asked to traverse during the next election campaign, it will be leading the way for others, as the Netherlands and Australia did for Canada.