



Federal budget a technological snoozer, but a few changes worth noting: Peter Nowak

The pundits warned us it was going to be a [boring federal budget](#) and well, they weren't wrong, especially when it comes to technology. In that vein, the Canadian government on Tuesday delivered a fiscal plan highlighted by a repeat of a previously announced effort, a vague promise of another, the renewal of an ongoing program and a few other minor tidbits. There were no surprises when it comes to wireless, with the budget confirming the Conservatives' plan to amend the Telecommunications Act "to cap wholesale domestic wireless roaming rates to prevent wireless providers from charging other companies more than they charge their own customers for mobile voice, data and text services."



Industry Minister James Moore first announced this intention – which will ultimately make it easier for smaller wireless companies such as Wind to use the networks of Bell, Rogers, Telus and other incumbent operators – [back in December](#). The budget also repeated a proposed change, announced at the same time as the roaming plan, that would allow the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and Moore's department of Industry Canada to levy fines on companies if they violate established rules such as the Wireless Code. It's worth noting that the CRTC has been asking for this ability since, well, [at least 2008](#). Better late than never, obviously. Perhaps the most technologically noteworthy part of the whole document is its pledge of \$305 million over five years to build better broadband in rural and Northern communities. The details of this program will be announced over the coming months, with little being revealed at this point. How this plays out will be very interesting to watch, given [the tragedy](#) that is broadband in Northern Canada. Fewer than half of residents had access to download speeds of five megabits or higher as of 2012, while those who did got it at very high costs, according to the CRTC. Upload speeds – necessary for pretty much any sort of online business – are even worse, as I illustrated [the other day](#). The culprit is a long-running monopoly by Bell-owned Northwestel. Northerners were cautiously optimistic about the news. "This will allow for much-needed growth in broadband and assist the development of mobile, competitive local voice and essential government services," said Dean Proctor, chief development officer of Northwestel competitor SSI, in a release. "We look forward to work with the government to realize these investments as concrete action plans in the North." The budget also renews the Computers for Schools program, with \$176 million added to the \$18 million already being supplied by Industry Canada to provide students with skills and equipment. There's also some of the standard boilerplate spending on various research and job training programs, plus the announcement of a consultation on how multinational e-commerce companies (such as Amazon, Apple and eBay) should be taxed as well as promises to ratify various international treaties on intellectual property. If there's one slightly surprising tidbit, it's the announcement of plans to regulate virtual currencies such as Bitcoin, although even that's not entirely unexpected [given how controversial](#) such things have been around the world. Anyone hoping for anything dramatic from this budget, in terms of technology or otherwise, was probably barking up the wrong tree. Not only is this a Conservative government, and therefore one prone to being, y'know... conservative, it's also a pre-election year. The real fireworks, if any can really be expected, may happen next year ahead of the expected election. I was hoping the government might take the opportunity to also reveal the results of the 700 Mhz wireless spectrum auction, but it looks like that's not going to happen until next week or later, according to [at least one reporter](#). That may not be very exciting either – hey, Bell, Rogers and Telus got more spectrum, woohoo? – unless of course Quebec's Videotron did indeed buy licenses across the country with an eye to expanding its wireless network nationally. The budget was another opportunity to introduce a long-awaited and seriously overdue Digital Economy Strategy and some observers believe the government has in fact effectively delivered it, or at least a good portion of it, by stealth and [through piece-meal fashion](#) over the past little while. If so, the Conservatives have gone about it differently than just about every other government in the developed world, which is not a bad thing in and of itself, but they still lack the over-arching and cohesive vision that many peer countries adopted years ago. Taking a look at, say, Australia's [concrete and goal-oriented](#) digital economy strategy reveals how far Canada still has to go in this regard.

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