The restocking of inventories continued even more briskly than in the previous year, with business investment in inventories growing 36.2 percent in 2011. Business investment in non-farm inventories expanded 21.9 percent from the previous year, to $9.1 billion, most of that increase occurring in the wholesale trade sector, which grew 92.0 percent. Wholesale inventories of both durable and non-durable goods expanded considerably, although offset by the drop in retail inventories of motor vehicles. Manufacturing inventories of durables expanded 13.4 percent, but manufacturing inventories of non-durables contracted 8.6 percent. Farm inventories expanded to $1.5 billion, with growth in grain inventories leading the way.

Real personal expenditures on consumer goods and services slowed down in 2011, increasing only 2.2 percent. This added 1.29 percentage points to real GDP growth, a reduction from the 2.01-percentage point contribution the year before. Growth in this category was driven by expenditures on services, which expanded 3.0 percent. That growth resulted in a contribution of 0.98 percentage point to real GDP growth, also a reduction from a 1.20-percentage points contribution in 2010. Growth in durables, semi-durables and non-durables was weaker at 1.1 percent, 1.7 percent and 1.0 percent, respectively. All of these items contributed less to the real GDP growth than in the previous year, with the total contribution from goods amounting to only 0.31 percentage point compared to 0.81 percentage point in 2010.

Among major sectors, real consumer expenditures rose the most in the clothing and footwear sector in 2011, with a 4.4-percent increase in spending amounting to $1.9 billion. Furniture, furnishings and household equipment and maintenance was the slowest-growing of the major sectors, expanding just 0.4 percent (up $0.3 billion). Expenditure growth by subsector was the highest for natural gas (up 6.2 percent), other fuels (up 5.6 percent), women's and children's clothing (up 5.6 percent), purchased transportation (up 5.2 percent) and net expenditures abroad (up 9.8 percent). By contrast, during 2011 declines occurred in expenditures on new and used motor vehicles (down 0.4 percent), tobacco products (down 1.2 percent), semi-durable household furnishings (down 0.4 percent), reading and entertainment supplies(down 2.2 percent), recreational services (down 1.4 percent), and personal effects (down 4.3 percent).

Government contribution to the growth in real GDP was the lowest in five years, totalling 0.17 percentage point. Total government spending and investment grew only 0.5 percent in 2011. A 2.9-percent decrease in government investment, which dragged GDP down by 0.12 percentage point, was offset by a 1.2-percent increase in government spending on goods and services, which contributed 0.28 percentage point to real GDP growth.

Real exports and imports of goods and services rose by 4.4 percent and 6.5 percent, respectively. Slower export growth slowed the contributions of exports to GDP to 1.33 percentage points in 2011, down from 1.83 percentage points in 2010. However, the negative contribution from growth in real imports decreased even more, from 3.95 percentage points in 2010 to 2.05 percentage points in 2011. As a result, trade was a drag on growth last year, but to a much lesser extent than in three of the previous four years: the net exports contribution was negative 0.72 percentage point last year, an improvement on the negative 2.12-percentage points contribution in 2010.