

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

Tuesday, February 20, 2007

Business of Supply

Opposition Motion--National Anti-poverty Strategy

(1125)

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, as Canadians watch this debate on television, they are looking to us as parliamentarians to give them a sense of hope. They are looking to us as parliamentarians to give them a chance and an opportunity to live their dreams. They are looking to us as parliamentarians to ensure they have the tools and the resources they need to get out of poverty.

Canadians want a government and they want politicians who do not have a “me” approach but practise a “we” approach so that, together, as Canadians, we can continue to be the envy of the world.

It is unfortunate that since being elected the Conservative government has betrayed and ignored the voices of many Canadian families and the most vulnerable in our society. With its ideological, right wing approach, the Conservatives have single-handedly created a situation that will contribute to the rise of poverty in our country.

In my own riding of Brampton—Springdale, I have heard from women, seniors, children, people from cultural groups and youth organizations who have been impacted by the cuts that the government has made to important social programs.

The anti-poverty strategy put forward by the NDP is needed because the Conservative minority government has adopted a “fend for yourself” policy in respect to Canadians.

Let us talk about child care. Whether a senior, a youth or family is in need of child care, they need to be one of the lucky ones to benefit from the government's policy. If both parents can afford to stay at home, they will be the lucky ones under the Conservative government. However, like the 70% of children under six years of age whose mothers are working, those parents do not actually luck out under the government's policy because its plan only ensures benefits for those who are well off.

The neo-Conservative government does not understand the needs of Canadian families. The families who will benefit the least from this so-called universal child care benefit are those who really need it most.

Let us take a look at an example. A couple earning \$40,000 each will lose about one-third of their monthly benefit, winding up with only \$60 a month per child for child care. If we look at the cost of child care, this by no means will help them to ensure their children have the very best start in life.

I would like to compare this to what the former minister of human resources and social development has spent on limousines in the last three days. It was more than \$1,800. This is money that could have been utilized by many Canadian parents and families who are living in poverty.

Child care advocacy groups and Canadian parents and families have issued a report card in this regard giving the Prime Minister and the new Conservative government a failing grade when it comes to delivering programs for children who are living in poverty in this country.

The situation is about to get worse because the funding that was implemented under the former Liberal government, with the early learning and child care initiatives, will run out next month and we will have an additional crisis in this country. We will have an additional crisis because the Conservative government failed to deliver on its promise to create 125,000 spaces. It has created zero of those spaces.

It has also failed Canadians and contributed to poverty by cancelling programs that are impacting the most vulnerable in our society, by cutting funding and ignoring priorities that are important to Canadians. It seems as if the Conservative government is ripping at the seams of our social fabric.

Some of the other Conservative policy initiatives have hit low income Canadians particularly hard. They have increased the bottom income tax rate from 15% to 15.5%. Instead of reducing income taxes for those who need it most, they have actually increased taxes. By lowering the basic personal exemption by \$400, they have put 200,000 low income Canadians back on the tax rolls. They have eliminated the young child supplement to the child tax benefit. They have cancelled the Kelowna accord, which would have addressed poverty among aboriginal Canadians.

(1130)

Another demographic hit by the Conservative Party's policy is youth. Students who have relied on summer jobs to ensure they can pay for their tuition, and perhaps get out of poverty, are going to suffer under this government, because the Conservatives have cut \$55 million from the summer career placement program.

I spoke about the aboriginal community. Poverty among aboriginals is another significant challenge. Even though during the election campaign the Conservatives promised they would uphold the Government of Canada's commitment to first nations and aboriginal communities, the first thing they did in office was cut the \$5 billion Kelowna accord, an accord that would have invested in children, health care and educational programs for our aboriginal communities.

Not only did the Conservatives cut the Kelowna accord, they have made more budget cuts to programs that are vital to the aboriginal community. They have cut child care funding for first nations, the first nations stop smoking program, and funding for aboriginal languages. It is unfortunate that due to these program cuts the Conservatives have made it very clear to aboriginal Canadians that they are not one of their priorities.

I will read for members a quote from Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, who was left to conclude, "We're the only community that's been targeted this way". He said, "We ask ourselves if this government really does care about the First Nations communities". Now, under the leadership of Phil Fontaine, the Assembly of First Nations has had to launch its own campaign to address the issue of poverty in first nations communities.

We can talk about homelessness. We can talk about the fact that the government has not provided transitional funding to ensure those who are the most vulnerable in our society can get access to

funding from SCPI, the supporting communities partnership initiative, to have the resources and tools they need to live in affordable housing.

What is worse is the fact that the government has taken away needed transitional funding when it cancelled the SCPI program. That has resulted in hundreds of shelters and the homeless being left in limbo, with shelters facing the fact that they might have to close and the homeless being left out in the cold due to the Conservative government's new philosophy.

If the government truly valued our nation's social programs, it would have made sure that a transition program for the homeless in this country was in place. Let us take a look at the Conservatives' 2006 platform. I was quite surprised when I took a look at their platform. There is nothing, not one initiative outlined in their election platform, that talks about poverty reduction or the minimum wage.

Let us take a look at the Liberal Party's track record. We are committed to social justice, to ensuring fair justice in terms of income distribution. The policies and the programs established under the Liberal government have ensured that Canada's social safety net is the best in the world. We ensured that by working together with the provinces and territories to make our country even stronger.

That is why we support today's motion for creating a national anti-poverty strategy and for ensuring that as the federal government there is an opportunity to increase the minimum wage to \$10.

In conclusion, I find it slightly hypocritical that the NDP members are actually putting forward this motion, because it is due to their alliance with the Conservatives that the Liberal government was forced to go to an election and was not able to deliver on behalf of children, in ensuring that there were child care spaces, and on behalf of seniors, women and the most vulnerable in this country.

We on this side of the House are committed to a national anti-poverty strategy. We are committed as a party to standing up for the most vulnerable in our society. We are committed to addressing the root causes of poverty in a comprehensive approach, an approach that champions social justice and economic prosperity.

(1135)

We have a dynamic team that is passionate, committed and driven to ensure that our approach, the Liberal approach, is one that creates acceptance of tolerance, equality and opportunity, because those are core values that so many Canadians across the country cherish. I am sure that with all parliamentarians working together we will be able to create a national anti-poverty strategy. We must all believe in this in our hearts.

Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ):

Mr. Speaker, I want to ask my colleague what she thinks of the statements made earlier by two Conservative members, including the parliamentary secretary, to the effect that the solution to poverty is a thriving economy.

I respectfully submit that Canada's economy has never been as healthy as it has in the past 20 years. For the past three or four years, our economy has been booming. Our economic performance is so strong that Canada is held up as a model for other nations. Yet the number of homeless people and people using food banks is growing steadily. Two years ago, 885,000 people used food banks in Canada. That is more than the population of Ottawa. Two years ago, 245,000 children under 15 used food banks. Last year, that number rose to 325,000.

If we can fight poverty with economic growth, why is poverty continuing to grow? Something is not right. I would like to hear my colleague's thoughts on this. Does she share the Conservatives' opinion?

[English]

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, I have had the opportunity to sit with the member on the human resources and social development committee. I know that he is very passionately committed to ensuring that all Canadians, regardless of their socio-economic status, have the best opportunities available to them.

To answer the hon. member's question, I can say that when the Conservatives spoke to the motion, I found it quite ironic that they did not address the motion itself in terms of having a comprehensive approach to dealing with the creation of a national anti-poverty strategy.

I think the hon. member would like me to read for him what was written in 1997 by our Prime Minister at the moment, who hopefully will be the former prime minister:

In terms of the unemployed, of which we have over a million-and-a-half, don't feel particularly bad for many of these people. They don't feel bad about it themselves, as long as they're receiving generous social assistance and unemployment insurance.

That was written by the Prime Minister in a speech for the Council for National Policy in 1997. We also can take a look at some other quotes from what he has written. Again in 1997, he said:

Canada is a Northern European welfare state in the worst sense of the term, and very proud of it.

Is this a Prime Minister and a government that really believe in the most vulnerable of our society? We have seen this at first hand since the Conservatives have been elected in all the cuts they have made to important social programs in this country.

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the chance to address some of the issues the member has raised.

The member mentions 1997. It is interesting that she would quote the current Prime Minister from that year, because that was the very year, of course, in which the previous Liberal government was cutting \$25 billion out of social programs: money for people who were without homes, money for people who were seeking to go to university, money for people who were trying to get health care, money for the elderly, and money for the disabled.

They were the deepest cuts in Canada's social safety net in the history of the country, so it is ironic that the member would stand up and be outraged at the prospect that the government is not supporting a national anti-poverty strategy when in fact, apparently, the previous Liberal government had a strategy to create poverty and succeeded in doing that to a great degree.

I do not expect the member to agree with this, but I wonder if the member would acknowledge for a moment that her government, the Liberal Party, made the deepest cuts ever in Canadian history to Canada's social safety net, and in doing that really revealed its true stripes when it comes to dealing with the poor, the homeless and the people who need help.

(1140)

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, I am certainly not going to agree with the member. Since he has stated the track record of the Liberal government, I will remind him that the Liberals took over from the Mulroney government in 1993 when the government was left in an absolute mess. It was due to proper fiscal management and investment in important social programs for this country that we were able to deliver eight consecutive balanced budgets.

Let me tell the House about some of the investments that the Liberal government made for the--

The Deputy Speaker:

I am sorry, but there is no time for that.