

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

Thursday, April 6, 2006

Social Development

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise before the House today to express my sincere honour and sense of privilege to have the support of the constituents of Brampton--Springdale and to be able to serve as their member of Parliament. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the many volunteers who dedicated countless hours to ensuring this victory.

I want to assure my constituents that I will continue to work on their behalf to ensure that the values of equality, justice, acceptance and tolerance continue to remain the hallmark of our great country.

Furthermore, I will continue to be a firm proponent of creating an environment in which children, seniors and families have the opportunity to prosper and succeed. To achieve this, we must ensure that we tackle the many challenges, that we empower our young people and address the issues of crime and violence, and that we work together to raise the standard of living for all women and seniors.

I believe that as Canadians we must continue to strive to build upon our record of achievement and ensure that we remain one of the best countries and nations in the world.

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Resumption of debate on Address in Reply

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

Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to speak in response to the Speech from the Throne. I first would like to take this opportunity to congratulate all the new colleagues and new members in the House on their victories.

I also would like to begin by expressing my sincere and genuine thanks to my constituents of Brampton--Springdale for their support in awarding me this tremendous honour and privilege to continue to serve as their member of Parliament.

I also would like to thank the thousands of volunteers who dedicated many tireless hours to ensuring that we would be successful in our victory in Brampton--Springdale. I thank my volunteers for their hard work and their tremendous commitment.

As I stand here before the House today as a member of the opposition party for the first time, I would like to assure Bramptonians and Canadians that I will continue to be a firm proponent of ensuring that we create and build an environment in which children, seniors and families have the opportunity to really prosper and succeed.

In addition, I look forward to working on behalf of my constituents and thousands of Canadians to ensure that the values of equality, of justice, of acceptance, of respect and tolerance continue to remain the hallmark of our great country. Many of these values unfortunately have not been highlighted in the Conservative government's future agenda.

As I stand here today in the House, I wish to echo the concerns of many of my constituents of Brampton--Springdale who have called and e-mailed on their disappointment in the vagueness in regard to the lack of vision presented in the Speech from the Throne.

Although the Speech from the Throne reiterated the five Conservative campaign priorities and added two additional priorities with regard to federalism and the international obligations, it really provided no comprehensive plan or path for the future of our great nation. Many priorities and issues that are important to Canadians from coast to coast have been neglected in the Speech from the Throne.

The path that the Prime Minister has envisioned avoids issues that face our seniors, our women and our young people. It really makes no concrete reference to our first nations communities and barely even touches upon many of the issues that face our new immigrants such as foreign credential recognition.

In short, the Speech from the Throne really sets no clear goals and provides no legislative or fiscal framework of how these initiatives will be implemented.

It was unfortunate that in the Speech from the Throne language was utilized which was very unstatesman-like and also focused on the past instead of really ensuring that the Speech from the Throne would focus on the future.

Many of the priorities outlined do not serve many of the other pressing issues that our country faces. What Canadians need now is a government that will ensure and is prepared to face the many challenges that are encountered by families on a day to day basis. I think it is extremely important that the Conservative government move forward on a positive note, on a positive message instead of promoting negativity.

As I stand here today, I think it is extremely fortunate that the Conservative government has inherited one of the best fiscal records of any incoming government, due to the tremendous achievements that were accomplished by the Liberal government and by our former ministers of finance.

This incoming government has inherited from the previous Liberal government one of the strongest economic records, one of the best fiscal records in the G-7, a 30-year low in unemployment rates and eight consecutive balanced budgets. Yet I find it extremely shocking that the government is going on a slashing binge and cutting very important social programs that are essential to many Canadians and their families.

The first question that I think is important to ask is, why is the government cancelling child care funding agreements with provinces that have taken years of hard work and dedication by many members of the House and many stakeholders from coast to coast to implement?

The Conservative plan to scrap the child care agreements reached by provinces after much negotiation and with stakeholders by the Liberal government has been put in in favour of a taxable \$25 a week payout to parents. Having a cash payout to parents is really not a child care strategy or a child care plan. As many of us know, \$1.60 a day is not going to allow parents across the country to provide quality child care for their children.

(1320)

The Ontario government recently announced that it would not proceed with its plan to create 6,000 new child care spaces. The Conservatives keep talking about choice. What choice are parents going to have if child care is expensive and unavailable due to the chronic shortage of spaces?

All provinces, as well as parents' groups, women's groups and advocacy groups, especially those representing the lower and middle income class, have not been in favour. They have been opposed to the Mr. Harper's plan because they recognize the importance of ensuring a nationally funded--

Mr. Pierre Poilievre:

Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The member across referred to the Prime Minister by his name. We ask that the rules of the House be respected and that the distinguished colleague stay within the confines of the Standing Orders of the House.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer):

I thank the member for his point of order. I would remind the member for Brampton--Springdale that we refer to colleagues either by their riding names or by their titles.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, the point of order is noted. I apologize.

One must also ask the question to the Conservative government of why there has been no mention in the Speech from the Throne about the implementation and the continuation of the historic Kelowna accord, which would ensure that the standard of living for the Canada's first nations, Inuit and Métis people is raised.

Moreover, the Conservative Speech from the Throne did not talk about innovation, research and development, important qualities that our nation must ensure to compete in a global arena. We require those qualities to ensure Canada's success in the global arena, yet the Speech from the Throne had no mention of global competitiveness.

The Conservative government has inherited one of the best fiscal records from the previous Liberal government. I would hope that as it moves forward it will ensure that Canada continues to remain one of the best countries in the world.

As we all know, it is of priority and extreme importance that we have a knowledge-based economy. That knowledge-based economy will be built by people, by investing in people with regard to education, human resources and a proper health care and child care plan.

Another issue raised by many of my constituents is the GST. They have asked why the Conservative government is willing to reduce the GST by 1% , yet not retain any of the \$30 billion tax cuts proposed by the previous Liberal government. Talking to any economist, one realizes that the savings provided by the Liberal government are of much greater value and benefit to Canadians than the 1% GST cut proposed by the Conservative government.

The Prime Minister needs to ensure that the government listens to Canadians. He needs to re-evaluate his plan to ensure that Canadians of all socio-economic backgrounds benefit from any financial savings. When we take a look at the statistics, only 5% of families make over \$150,000. The Conservative plan of a reduction of 1% in the GST would provide 30% of its benefits to those 5%. When we take a look at it, half of Canadian families from coast to coast earn less than \$40,000 a year. While 50% of Canadians are earning less than \$40,000 a year, only 20% would receive the benefits of Conservative tax cuts, an average of just \$163 per year.

The only clarity offered in this plan by the Conservative government is it would benefit higher income families while those who need the help the most, middle and lower income families, would not benefit.

I must also question the Prime Minister's intentions in renegeing on Canada's Kyoto commitments to deal with climate change and the environmental degradation to Canada's air, land and water. We need to talk about sustainability. Cancelling the one tonne challenge that was utilized to promote many of these important criteria across this country is not a step in the right direction.

As we move forward, it is important that the Speech from the Throne and the priorities of the Conservative government reflect the needs of all Canadians, regardless of their cultural backgrounds and socio-economic record, and ensure that it focuses a message on positivity.

I would hope that the other priorities I spoke about, such as immigrants, the aboriginal population, seniors, young people and women, would be addressed by the Conservative government in the future.

(1325)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, congratulations on your new position.

I would like to thank my hon. colleague for her very insightful review of the Speech from the Throne and for noting that there is a total lack of vision, that there is no protection for the low and the middle income and that it appears the Speech from the Throne and the Conservative platform would only benefit the 5% of people who are in the higher income bracket.

Could my hon. colleague comment on this? Where else has the government failed to look after the needs of the middle and the lower income Canadians?

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, when we take a look at implementing any initiatives in our great country, it is important to realize that 50% of families make less than \$40,000. We have spoken about the very minimal benefit that the low and middle income class families would receive from the reduction in the GST. However, if the previous Liberal government's plan for \$30 billion in tax cuts would be implemented and sustained, we would ensure that many lower and middle income class families would also receive benefits.

Some of the other issues that have been neglected in the Conservative plan and in its priorities also deal with the issue of affordable housing. Many constituents in Brampton—Springdale require affordable housing. Unfortunately, once again, there is no plan of action in the Conservative plan.

In looking at the Speech from the Throne it is very evident that it is very minimal in terms of substance. It was a brochure, and it was one of the weakest speeches from the throne that has ever been done.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my hon. colleague on her speech and remind her that the Liberal government had such a fine fiscal record thanks to two measures implemented by the previous Conservative government, that is the free trade agreement and the goods and services tax. It was an unpopular tax that the Conservative government had the courage to introduce in order to cut the deficits run up by the previous Liberal governments.

We know that the previous Liberal government accumulated surpluses but that it also made deep cuts to health care, which is essential, especially for people on low incomes.

Why did this government not reduce the GST more quickly since it was running surpluses?

(1330)

[English]

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, it is really important that as the Conservative government moves forward it also takes a stroll down memory lane. Every Canadian knows that Brian Mulroney as prime minister and the former Conservative government left with one of the worst economic track records, and the Liberals inherited that.

It was only due to the tremendous amount of dedication shown by ministers of finance in the Liberal government that ensured we had eight consecutive balanced budgets and a 30-year low in the unemployment record. We invested \$42 billion in health care. We made investments in the environment, in our seniors from coast to coast and in a national child care strategy.

The Conservatives must never forget that they are inheriting the best fiscal performance and record of any incoming government due to the Liberal government.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Savoie (Victoria, NDP):

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member referred to the lack of a commitment to young people. The post-secondary education transfer is still one of the most urgent aspects of the fiscal imbalance that we are discussing. Yesterday, the Minister of Finance dodged a question in this regard by saying that we would have to wait for the budget first, and then the consultations and deliberations, before we could address this important question. While the minister just sits on his hands, the students at universities and colleges are suffering under terrible debt loads, which just get worse.

Does the hon. member believe, as I do, that if we want to see this brilliant future that the throne speech talks about, we must first act much more quickly than this government seems ready to do and then—

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer):

The member for Brampton—Springdale, 30 seconds or less, please.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, when we speak about investing in our young people and in our education, it is the Liberal opposition that will stand up for these values. I would hope if the member opposite truly believes in investing in young people and in education, that the NDP will not be in bed with the Conservative government and will be an effective voice for young people across the country.

The Liberal government previously had invested in education by ensuring tax cuts for tuition fees, not providing minimal investments in young people just in terms of their books. The Liberal opposition will continue to be an effective voice for young people from coast to coast and we will--

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer):

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Tobique—Mactaquac.