Ottawa shrugs off UN warning on hunger and nutrition

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United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier De Schutter speaks to reporters during a press conference at the National Press Theatre in Ottawa on Wednesday, May 16, 2012. (Sean Kilpatrick/THE CANADIAN PRESS)

The UN’s right-to-food envoy is raising the alarm about hunger and poor diets in Canada, but the federal government says he’s wasting his breath.

The United Nations’ special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, has just wrapped up an official 11-day investigation into food security in Canada.

- Childhood hunger is a Canadian public health crisis
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- EI reform set to redefine ‘suitable’ work for job seekers
He has concluded that Canada is flouting its international human-rights obligations by ignoring hunger within its own borders, even as 800,000 households here don’t have the wherewithal to ensure they can put proper food on the table.

“What I’ve seen in Canada is a system that presents barriers for the poor to access nutritious diets and that tolerates increased inequalities between rich and poor, and aboriginal (and) non-aboriginal peoples,” Mr. De Schutter said.

He said he was particularly concerned about the large number of people living on social assistance who see their income drained away by housing, and can’t afford to provide an adequate diet for their families.

“Here I have to say my concerns are extremely severe, and I don’t see why I should mince my words,” he said.

“People are simply too poor to eat decently.”

He called for a national food strategy that would emphasize local food production, reform food subsidies for the North, ensure a living wage for low-income people, and pull together the disparate attempts to deal with hunger across the country.

Mr. De Schutter also criticized Ottawa for failing to make sure provinces spend their transfer payments on social services.

And he said the federal government should be far stricter in its regulation of sodium, sugar and fat in the food Canadians buy.

Ottawa’s reaction has been blunt.

“I think this is completely ridiculous,” Immigration Minister Jason Kenney said just before the envoy presented his report.

“Canada is one of the wealthiest and most democratic countries in the world. We believe that the UN should focus on development ... in countries where people are starving. We think it’s simply a waste of resources to come to Canada to give political lectures.”

Until Wednesday, Mr. De Schutter did not have any access to federal cabinet ministers to discuss his findings, making do with senior officials instead. Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq did finally agree to meet with him at the last minute — but mainly to promote the seal hunt.

“The minister was increasingly frustrated that someone would write about food security in the North without going there,” Mr. Aglukkaq’s spokesman said in an email.

Mr. De Schutter travelled to cities across Canada, visited some reserves and met with aboriginal representatives, but did not get to the North.

He makes no apologies for being “political” in his recommendations, and said he hopes the federal government is provoked into holding a serious conversation about how to improve poverty and food security in Canada.

The federal government has repeatedly dismissed appeals for national strategies to deal with poverty and housing. The Conservatives argue that those areas are better dealt with by the provinces, since they can take regional variations into account.
Indeed, several provinces have adopted poverty reduction strategies in the last few years.

However, the NDP notes that during the last federal election campaign, the Conservatives promised a national farm and food strategy that would focus on buoying local farmers, opening up new markets and ensuring food safety.

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