With venom directed at UN right-to-food envoy, are there no good cops left in cabinet?

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That derailed quickly.

The last day of the official visit to Canada by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food began with Olivier De Schutter decrying Canada for being “in violation of international obligations” (think the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which Canada ratified a long time ago.) He also blasted people for holding a “self-righteous” attitude about how great Canada is, given how many families do not have the means to adequately feed their children.

“It’s not because the country is a wealthy country that there are no problems. In fact, the problems are very significant and, frankly, this sort of self-righteousness about the situation being good in Canada is not corresponding to what I saw on the ground, not at all,” De Schutter told Postmedia News, pointing to up to 900,000 households and 2.5 million people in Canada who, he claims, are too poor to afford adequate diets.

The Conservative government’s response? Butt out, you patronizing ill-informed techno-crat. Well, I’m (partly) paraphrasing, but here’s a sampling of the venom directed at De Schutter:

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney got things rolling, when he told reporters pointedly that the UN “should focus its efforts on those countries where there is widespread hunger, widespread material poverty and not get into political exercises in developed democracies like Canada. We don’t think that’s a very intelligent use of their resources.”

If we missed the point, Kenney was happy to rephrase: “I think this is completely ridiculous. Canada is one of the wealthiest, most democratic countries in the world. According to us, we believe that the UN should focus on development in countries where people are starving and we think it’s simply a waste of resources to come to Canada to give them political lecturing.” Kenney added.

If people expected Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq, representing the riding of Nunavut, to play good cop, they must have been shocked to see her actually ratchet up the rhetoric. She called De Schutter “ill-informed” and “patronizing” about the challenges facing aboriginals in Canada’s Arctic communities. She also said she was “disappointed” by her meeting with him and “insulted” that he “chose to study us, but chose not to visit us.”

The meeting, held after his news conference, was a last-minute addition to De Schutter’s schedule after the government said at the beginning of his mission that no cabinet ministers were available to meet him. It was his first to a developed country.

What Aglukkaq didn’t say was De Schutter he did visit remote, fly-in aboriginal communities in Manitoba and Alberta. He also met with Inuit leadership from Canada’s Arctic, who lauded De Schutter’s call for a national food strategy that sees the right to food as a human right. In fact, Mary Simon, head of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national organization representing the Inuit, was in Ottawa on Wednesday to support De Schutter’s conclusion. At a press conference, she cited a recent population health survey, with almost 70 per cent of Inuit households were found to be food insecure. That is six times more than Canadian national average, Simon told reporters.

Meanwhile, De Schutter wasn’t in any mood to back away from his comments. When asked about Kenney’s comments about how he should stick to famine-stricken countries with real problems, De Schutter shot back:

“Well, of course it’s political. The right to food is about politics, it’s not about technicalities. It’s a matter of principle and it’s a matter of political will. I think these comments are symptomatic of the very problem that is my duty to address and that my mission should indeed elicit such comments so that this becomes a national conversation at the highest level of government.”

Of course, many believe that De Schutter, appointed by the UN Human Rights Council and is independent from any government or organization, should focus his efforts on developing countries. They don’t buy in to the idea that the right to adequate food is a human right on par with political and civil rights. Fair enough — and columnists have been debating these very points.

It know the Conservative government doesn’t really do subtle, but is there nobody left to play good cop?

Now, it’s purely coincidental that, after this ugly dust-up between the Harper government and the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, the director of the division of international protection of the UN High Commission for Refugees had to cancel his press conference on Parliamentary Hill today. (He’s delayed in Toronto). But Volker Turk must be relieved he won’t be facing any bad cops in Ottawa.
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