Back to Food for thought: Why David Olive is ashamed to be a Canadian today

Food for thought: Why David Olive is ashamed to be a Canadian today

May 17, 2012

David Olive

I feel ashamed to be a Canadian today.

One of our best friends, the U.N., exhorted us Wednesday to make our “land of plenty” a prosperous place for the unacceptably large number of us who are poor.

“Canada has long been seen as a land of plenty,” Olivier De Schutter, the U.N.’s right-to-food envoy, told an Ottawa press conference.

“Yet today one in 10 [Canadian] families with a child under 6 is unable to meet their daily food needs. These rates of food insecurity are unacceptable, and it is time for Canada to adopt a national right-to-food strategy.”

None of that shames me. I know my fellow citizens want to do better. They want, for instance, Ottawa to stop reneging on Parliament’s unanimous commitment, back in 1990, to eradicate child poverty by 2000.

We already know that a poor population is an unhealthy and under-educated one. As a practical rather than ethical matter, we can’t afford that in a globally competitive world.

We know we are held back by skills shortages across vocations and regions. That poverty and subsistence incomes are a drag on economic growth, diminishing consumer purchasing power, among other things.

We know that chronic poverty is linked with cancer, diabetes, heart disease and psychiatric disorders, and with crime, substance abuse and other anti-social behaviours. And that poverty is expensive. Poverty related obesity alone – a North America-wide crisis – costs Canada an estimated $5-billion in healthcare costs and lost productivity. Canada’s productivity rate – a chief measure of economic vibrancy – lags that of many of our global rivals.

The U.N. reminder is a useful one. It echoes concerns expressed by business leaders during the awareness-raising activities of the Occupy movement, and alarming reports last year on child poverty and income inequality from the Conference Board of Canada, a business-related think tank.

No, what shames me is the churlish response of my federal government to the U.N’s honest, good-faith call to action.

Jason Kenney, Tory immigration minister and designated hitman on the admittedly scathing U.N. report, managed to put out of mind his own government’s lecturing to China on its abysmal human-rights practices, and to Washington on its folly in not promptly approving a pipeline megaproject that poses environmental risks for U.S. citizens.

"It would be our hope that the contributions that we make to the United Nations are used to help starving people in developing countries, not to give lectures to wealthy and developed countries like Canada,” Kennedy said Wednesday.

Actually, the wealthy nations could use a lecture, on, say, the 2008-09 meltdown of their quick-buck financial system that imposed a recession on the world, disproportionately afflicting developing nations.

Kenney said the U.N. itself ranks Canada among the best countries in which to live. What he didn’t say is that we’ve slid by that measure, now ranking sixth on the U.N.’s Human Development Index, trailing Norway, Australia, the Netherlands, the U.S. and New Zealand. In 1992 and from 1994 to 2000, Canada ranked first.

If anything, De Schutter was overly diplomatic about the challenges we face. Three million of us are enduring some measure of deprivation, from dire poverty to struggling to make ends meet. That includes more than 600,000 children.

We not only have a growing gap between rich and poor, but it’s growing faster in Canada than most rich countries. Our middle class hasn’t seen a pay raise in 30 years. Meanwhile, Brazil has been narrowing its income gap, by an average of 1.5 per cent a year, over the past decade.

De Schutter called Wednesday for a Canadian right-to-food strategy. Which at least bears consideration, given that the Tories have strategies for exhausting taxpayer funds on U.S. fighter jets that can’t fly, and prisons we don’t need with crime rates in sustainable decline.
We know what that strategy requires: An increase in minimum wages, affordable housing units, and enriched daycare slots, for a start. And restoring taxes to where they were in 2000. That would give Ottawa an extra $48 billion to lift our people from misery and better assure Canada’s economic prospects this century.

Weak minds react with weakness to wise counsel. There’s also the moral repugnancy in our selective regard of outside advice.

When an alarmist International Monetary Fund and Wall Street Journal declared in the mid-1990s that Canada was flirting with fiscal ruin, the Chretien government eradicated the federal deficit lickety-split. It did so largely on the backs of the poor and working poor, among the reasons Ottawa broke its promise to impoverished Canadian children.

We can recognize that double standard for what it is – a rapid response to any threat to the comfortable, but a “shoot the messenger” reaction when a friend speaks truth to us about our sins.