Gov't response to rapporteur disappointing

BY DOUG CUTHAND, SPECIAL TO THE STARPHOENIX  MAY 18, 2012

It was a typical response from the Conservative government whose favourite tactic is to attack and refuse to retreat - cogent discussion be damned.

This week Oliver De Schutter, the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food, completed an 11 day mission to Canada. His report was not favourable to Canada.

He found a country where an estimated 900,000 households - or 2.5 million people - are "food insecure." In 1996 the World Food Summit defined food security as "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life."

Naturally, De Schutter visited poor inner-city neighbourhoods and remote aboriginal communities in Manitoba and Alberta. He reported "very desperate conditions and people who are in extremely dire straits."

Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq could have accepted his report, reviewed his findings, and made recommendations. After all this is a very serious issue and it shouldn't be seen in partisan terms. Food insecurity is a fact in Canada and it has been the case regardless of the government in power.

But Aglukkaq chose to attack and ignore the valuable findings. She accused De Schutter of being an "ill informed and patronizing academic." This kind of rhetoric may play to the Tory base but it does little to address the very real problems our people face as an impoverished population that relies on food banks and welfare.

Aglukkaq went on to state that indigenous people don't face food insecurity because "they hunt every day." This is an out-of-date view.

Today people have to have boats and snow machines if they want to hunt. The traditional food supply is under pressure and becoming increasingly scarce. Food prices in the north are expected to rise in October when the Kafkaesquenamed Nutrition North program for remote northern communities comes into force. This program will end subsidies for many food products.

Urban aboriginals simply can't hunt for food unless they stalk pigeons and Canada geese. In fact there are charged urban myths out there of aboriginals dinning on geese in Wascana Park in Regina. But if we're expected to live off the land we have to buy it from First Nations hunters and risk breaking the law.

In order to deflect the issue Aglukkaq turned on the Third World, stating that 65 per cent of the world's hungry live in seven countries, India, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan."

This is true and obviously the Tories prepped her with distracting facts that skirt the issue.

In his comments to the media, De Schutter stated: "It's not because a 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."
He went on to state that his report will be presented to the UN Human rights Council and will form part of Canada's official human rights record.

Canada's human rights record has deteriorated in recent years but the government continues to ignore international criticism, choosing instead to laud the country's high standard of living.

In 2008, Canada decided not to ratify a complaints procedure as part of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to allow people to take their cases to the international arena if they had exhausted all domestic options. In 2009, Canada rejected key recommendations of the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review. One of the rejected recommendations included calling on Canada to develop a national strategy to reduce poverty based on human rights.

It seems that if you want to get to the Conservative government you have to embarrass it in the international arena. Just ask Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence, who declared a state of emergency in her community and called in the RCMP. The federal government went ballistic and seized her administration.

And of course there is the black eye that the world has given Canada over lack of direction on climate change. This more than any other factor will change the landscape and be the biggest threat to northern food sources.

The Conservative strategy is clear. Have an Inuit politician parrot the party line, thus making the issue internal to aboriginal people. In the House of Commons question, period she was answering questions directed toward Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan.

Sadly this is a federal government that would rather fight and turn people against one another than deal with the very important issues of poverty and malnutrition.

De Schutter plans to do a followup visit to Canada to assess the progress in tackling hunger and food insecurity. It should be an interesting visit if the government will let him into the country.