UN envoy blasts poverty in Canada

Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Conservative cabinet fairly erupted in indignation this past week as Canada took a knock from a United Nations envoy for turning a blind eye to the poverty, inequality and, yes, the hunger in our midst.

Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq denounced UN right-to-food envoy Olivier De Schutter as “patronizing,” “ill-informed” and “academic.” Immigration Minister Jason Kenney was no less harsh. “I think this is completely ridiculous,” he said. Instead of giving Canada “political lectures,” the UN should focus on “countries where people are starving,” he suggested.

Granted, no one likes to be criticized. And granted, Canada’s relative poverty bears little comparison to the dire misery in Africa, where people do starve. Moreover, De Schutter doesn’t seem to have had any special reason to come here on his first tour of a developed country, unless it was to make the point that no nation is beyond reproach.

Whatever the case, it’s always healthy to consider how others see us, even if the truth is unflattering. A country as democratic, rich and innovative as ours should be big enough to absorb a critique from time to time.

Certainly, Canadian social policy isn’t above criticism.

Some three million Canadians live in poverty or close to it, including more than 600,000 children, the UN report notes. Some 30 years after being introduced as an emergency measure, food banks have become a shameful fact of life in this country. Last year 900,000 people relied on them. Meanwhile, child poverty has been growing here, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, even as it has fallen in the United States, Britain and other countries. The rich/poor gap is increasing, too.

These are not transient problems. They are deeply-rooted, systemic and point to “a broken social protection system and the failure of the state to meet its obligations to its people,” De Schutter noted in a hard-hitting statement after a 10-day visit. Among other things, he called for a hike in the minimum wage, social assistance to cover the cost of “basic necessities,” indexing of assistance to real living costs and a separate housing benefit for the poorest families so they don’t end up paring back on food to keep a roof over their heads.

Whatever Harper’s ministers may say, these aren’t wild-eyed prescriptions from a know-nothing. They are remedies that Canadian poverty experts have called for. Poverty is linked to undereducation, poor health and underemployment. That’s a drag on the broader economy. Surely a Conservative government should recognize that.

Moreover, De Schutter argues persuasively that Ottawa can hardly claim that its hands are tied by debt and deficits. Compared to most industrial countries our books are in good shape. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives estimates that government has deliberately forgone $48 billion in revenue over the past decade by cutting personal, sales and corporate taxes. “Consequently, Canada has the fiscal space to address the basic human needs of its most marginalized and disempowered,” he points out. Letting the poor fall further behind is a heartless and economically unwise policy choice, not a fiscal necessity.

Sometimes the truth hurts. But not as much as poverty does. The Tories have a choice. They can rage at the UN and its message, or set the nation on a better course.