Iain Hunter column: He's right - we should be ashamed

BY IAIN HUNTER, TIMES COLONIST  MAY 20, 2012

If Olivier De Schutter thought he could shame Canadian governments into ensuring that poor families get enough to eat, he didn't know much about the Conservative government in Ottawa.

De Schutter, the UN "special rapporteur" on the Right to Food, had the effrontery to say last week after an 11-day tour of Canada that it's "unacceptable" and "shocking" that in this "land of plenty" one in 10 Canadian families with a child under the age of six is unable to get the food it needs.

But the response of cabinet ministers the next day made headlines too. Immigration Minister Jason Kenney called his remarks "completely ridiculous" and his trip to Canada a waste of funds that this country contributes to the UN.

Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq said De Schutter's criticism of food problems facing aboriginals was "patronizing," and "ill-informed."

There were the predictable rude columns from the usual columnists, calling the UN rapporteur a busybody, accusing him of trying to score political points and advising him to concentrate on places like Bangladesh, China and Ethiopia where people are feeling real hunger.

It was the UN appointee's first visit to a developed country. Funnily enough, the Canadian government invited De Schutter here. It was asked to extend the invitation, and couldn't, really, refuse.

But no cabinet minister would meet with him, bucking what he called a "tradition."

OK, this global champion of breakfast was a little irritating. He went on about inadequate housing, paltry minimum wages, Canada's comparatively low tax-to-GDP ratio among OECD countries and the "long history of political and economic marginalization" of First Nations.

He said we should spend more attention to feeding ourselves than selling food abroad. He even said too many of us are obese.

A number of conservative-minded commentators pointed out that there's no "right to food" in Canada, anyway, because it's not in the Charter. And if it's not there, where can such a right come from? Certainly not from the UN Human Rights Council on which countries run by tyrants and princelings are represented.

Crosspatches boast that malnutrition has not been getting worse in Canada, but has remained constant at five per cent of the population since 1992, according to the UN itself.

They cite Statistics Canada reports saying that households lacking food "security" fell to 7.7 per cent in 2008 from 9.2 per cent in 2004. They recall that the Conference Board of Canada thinks that while the poorest 20 per cent of Canadians are getting comparatively poorer, they're marginally better off than the poorest in the '70s.
On the other hand, although Parliament bravely declared in 1990 that poverty would be eradicated by 2000, the OECD reports that 15 per cent of children live in poverty in Canada, ranking it 20th out of 30 of the wealthiest member nations.

The UN ranked Canada the best place in the world to live from 1994 to 2000. Today we rank sixth on its Human Development Index.

As De Schutter detected during his meetings with inner-city organizations, the rural poor and First Nations groups, poverty is the reason that so many are malnourished in this land of plenty.

And poverty leaves vulnerable, as York University health researchers reported in 2010, the 83 per cent of Canadian families without access to regulated day care, people whose 30 per cent of total health costs aren't covered by medicare and the 40 per cent of disabled who are shut out of the work force - all this at the bottom, or close to it, of OECD rankings, and all this because of a lack of public spending by governments more inclined to speak harshly and carry big sticks.

De Schutter told us what he heard from the vulnerable among us and what we know already.

Canada is a rich country with a dirty secret. A lot of people - including those with the constitutional responsibility to do something about it - resent being reminded of this.

Poverty lurks in the Great Canadian Gut like a tapeworm, sucking nourishment from those who need it most.

De Schutter is right. It is shocking. If our governors aren't ashamed, a lot of Canadians are.

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