Hunger issue can't be denied

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Vancouver MP Hedy Fry
is guest speaker at LSCO

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Canadians realize there are people living in poverty, and Canadian children who are never properly fed. That's what makes the Conservative government's outright rejection of a United Nations food-supply report so unbelievable, says the Liberal health critic.

"I find this government's response appalling," says Vancouver MP Hedy Fry, who's speaking today in Lethbridge. "It was arrogant and rude."

Most Canadians are prepared to hear critical evaluations and learn from them, she said in an interview. As a family physician, Fry said she agrees with some of the findings reported by Olivier De Schutter, a United Nations "right to food" envoy who visited Canada's urban centres as well as its First Nations reserves and northern communities.

"The federal health department should be ashamed of itself," she said. And the health minister, an MP from the Arctic, is fully aware of how expensive basic foods have become in the north.

A secretary of state in the Paul Martin government, Fry will hold a "town hall" meeting on health issues from 2 to 4 p.m. at the Lethbridge Senior Citizens Organization before speaking at a fund-raising dinner for the Liberals' federal constituency organization this evening.

One of her party's outspoken advocates of equal rights for sexual minorities, she'll also address a noon-hour gathering of community members at the Aboriginal Housing office, 1275 3 Ave. S.

What's adding to Canadians' concerns about their food supply, she said, is the federal government's steady reduction of food safety inspections.

A government's first responsibility is protecting the health and well-being of its citizens, she said, yet it's also slashed support for the Coast Guard. After closing bases in Atlantic Canada, she noted, it announced this week it's also closing the base that covers Vancouver's harbour.

"Why is this government sacrificing Canadians' health and safety?"

The Stephen Harper government is also slashing support for soldiers returned from Afghanistan, she said. Up to 90 per cent have shown symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) but the government is downloading responsibility for their treatment onto the provincial health systems.

"Why would a government do something so brazenly harmful to people who've risked their lives?"

At the same time, Fry said the Harper government has done nothing in response to an all-party initiative to reduce the number of Canadians committing suicide. It's a growing crisis, she said, with reports even elderly men are taking their lives at a much higher rate.

Canadian teenagers coming out as gay, lesbian or transgendered are at even higher risk, she points out.

"Their suicides are seven times the national average," but the government has failed to respond. Cyber-bullying is one of the related issues, and Fry said she'll be tabling a private member's bill to address that. She's also signed on in support of a New Democrat MP's bill to include protection for trans Canadians in the Charter of Rights.

But legal protection is just a start, she said.
"We also need other ways to help young people feel protected and included."