Government’s slam of food envoy’s visit a weak argument

By Allison Smith
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It's what government tends to do with society's largest and most complex problems, while the people dealing with them despair and hope for a better future.

Olivier De Schutter’s recent visit to Canada received mixed reviews from media and was outright slammed as a “waste of time” by Immigration Minister Jason Kenney. De Schutter is the United Nations’ right-to-food envoy who released a scathing report that stated that although Canada is a rich, developed country, many of its citizens experience poverty and are unable to afford daily food needs. He also touched on the crises people in many Aboriginal communities are facing and the country’s problem with obesity.

He recommended Canadian governments work together to develop a national food strategy to address production, subsidy and labelling issues.
In reply to De Schutter’s remarks, Kenney said he and his colleagues would rather see Canada’s contributions to the United Nations go toward helping starving people in developing countries, rather than telling wealthy, developed countries like Canada how it should be addressing its challenges.

He said UN figures rank Canada as one of the best developed countries in the world. Though De Schutter’s remarks may have drawn the ire of Conservatives, who have not moved on calls for national strategies on poverty and housing,

Kenney is making a grave mistake in minimizing the struggles the hungry in Canada endure. Instead of expressing a willingness to work with De Schutter in good faith, calmly state which of his findings they take issue with and hammer out a solution, Kenny responded by saying our problems aren’t as bad as those of developing nations, and that De Schutter should stop his whining.

This is a weak argument. While Conservatives waste taxpayer dollars on fighter jets and mislead us about the cost of the purchase, that wealth isn’t trickling down to Canadians trying to pay rent and put food on their tables. Just because our struggles are different than the challenges citizens of developing nations are facing, does not make our problems more trivial or less worthy of our government’s attention.

The fact that Canada is a rich, developed country doesn’t help the one in 10 Canadians who are considered poor. Statistics Canada data indicates that about 3.2 million people live on low income, including 634,000 children.

I agree with De Schutter’s statement that despite our country’s wealth, we’ve failed to improve social assistance benefits and minimum wage to bring them in line with rising costs of basic necessities, including food and housing. People should also help themselves and take responsibility in contributing to their quality of life.

Canada remains one of the best countries in the world in which to live, but it is becoming increasingly difficult not to have a visceral reaction to this government’s arrogance, disrespect for taxpayer dollars and flagrant hypocrisy. International Development Minister Bev Oda’s recent luxury hotel stay comes to mind.

The minister responsible for the agency whose mission is to lead Canada’s international effort to help people living in poverty switched from one luxury hotel to another and billed taxpayers $16 for an orange juice on a recent trip. So, who are the Conservatives to say that the UN is not paying adequate attention to impoverished people in developing countries?

The frustrating thing is that a national food strategy would likely end up shelved after it paid lip service to the problem it would supposedly seek to alleviate.

It is a sad day in Canada when we’re not even starting at zero, which would be our ministers doing the job they’re paid to perform and acknowledging the problems millions of Canadians face daily.

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