Federal Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq is backpedalling.

In the wake of her angry condemnations of the United Nations special rapporteur’s report on food access in Canada, she now says she “never meant to imply that there were no hunger problems in the North.”

Rather, she explicitly blamed the problems on environmental campaigners who oppose hunting seal and polar bears. But denial and distraction have been the government line since Olivier De Schutter’s preliminary report came out on May 16.

Aglukkaq is now attempting to focus attention on “the North,” perhaps hoping this will make the issue sound irrelevant to the majority of Canadians. Conveniently ignored is the fact that the report looked at food access nationally — as the envoy traversed Canada from coast to coast.

The fact that “one in 10 families with a child under six (is) unable to meet their food needs,” is a startling statistic that should be of national concern. It may be hard to believe in a country where almost two thirds of us are either overweight or obese, according to the same report.

This was the sentiment that Immigration Minister Jason Kenney was relying on when he accused the UN of being “out of line” for investigating Canada, and suggested it should focus on starving populations — elsewhere.

The fact is that being fat doesn’t necessarily mean you are having too much of a good thing, though that is probably the only version Kenny is familiar with.

For an increasing number of people in developed countries, obesity is caused by having too little access to quality foods and spending scarce income on cheaply priced junk food. The result is an oversupply of bulky carbohydrates such as bread and potato chips, and too few fruits and vegetables in the diet. It is effectively to be starved of nutrition, which is necessary for proper physical and mental development.

Diseases like rickets, caused by nutrient deficiencies, are actually on the rise among Canadian children, according to pediatrician E. Lee Ford-Jones.

As for hunger, “17 per cent of First Nations adults” experience going hungry and not having enough money to buy food. This is the case across the country, though among the Inuit in the North, the rate is six times higher than the national average. With neglect so blatant, even the Conservative spin had to acknowledge some kind of problem, prompting Aglukkaq’s pathetic attempt to lay the blame on environmentalists.

But De Schutter was discussing the effectiveness of the government’s own Nutrition North food subsidy program, pointing out that it benefits food retailers more than needy communities. So this talk of seal hunting is merely an attempt to redden the waters.

While the circumstances of First Nations people are among the direst in the report, the loud recriminations on this subject have drowned out the other serious issues it raises. Among them is the fact that more than half of
all families on social assistance cannot afford a balanced diet. This points to the fact that our commitment to basic social security has failed to keep up with the rising cost of living.

As for the rest of us, who are able to purchase adequate food in our local supermarkets, there are other causes for concern. The UN report points out that our increasing reliance on large scale factory farming methods is environmentally unsustainable — and damaging to our own agriculture industry. It has resulted in fewer farms of ever-expanding size and heavy dependence on temporary foreign farm labour.

Encouraging smaller scale, local food production is good both for the economy and the environment.

But none of this is what the Conservatives want to hear. Rather, ignoring the concerns that Canadian communities expressed to the UN rapporteur, and condemning him as a meddling “outsider,” is the style of the day.

That attitude recalls the worst kind of unaccountable governments that Minister Kenney would like the UN to devote itself to. Does Canada’s GDP automatically ensure that there is no room for improvement in governance? By that logic, richer nations such as Saudi Arabia should also be deemed scrutiny-free zones.

If the refusal to address increasing poverty continues, attitude might not be the only resemblance between Canada and some of the poorer countries of the world.

*Eva Sajoo is a research associate with the Centre for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and Cultures at British Columbia’s Simon Fraser University. (Troy Media)*