UN food envoy Olivier De Schutter says Canada starves many of its citizens: Porter

Olivier De Schutter delivered his damning report on Canada’s growing poor and hungry to Geneva on Monday. Canada should be ashamed.

By: Catherine Porter Columnist, Published on Mon Mar 04 2013

If you could have anything drop down before you from heaven onto the sidewalk while making your way to the library one bright wintry day, what would it be?

A car? A blank cheque for $1,000? A husband?

For Sharon Norman, it was a cucumber.

Emerald green, firm, wrapped in cellophane.

“I looked to see if anyone had dropped it,” she said, sitting beside me at a table in the Stop Community Food Centre's drop-in lunch program.

“That was a really nice treat. It was in such good condition. But even if it had been run over, I would have taken it home.”

Beggars, as they say, can’t be choosers, and Norman had recently signed up for welfare.

She ate that cucumber in a salad made with cabbage from The Stop’s food bank and an avocado she earned by volunteering behind the food bank counter. She ate it on bread, saved from a free meal and delicately shepherded home. She even used the rubbery ends — dabbing them on her dry winter skin at night, instead of moisturizer, which she couldn’t afford anyway.

A cucumber from heaven.

“I made it last two weeks,” Norman told me.
Can you think of anything in your fridge you’ve savoured for two long weeks when you’ve been ravenous from hunger?

Everyone on welfare is ravenous. How can you not be, when you are living on $606 a month? Most clients at the Stop Community Food Centre live on less than $6 a day, after paying for rent.

We’d come to The Stop at lunch to eat, but first to listen to Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the right to food, talk about his report on Canada.

De Schutter spent 10 days travelling from Montreal to Edmonton last May, visiting farmers, first nations bands, government and activist offices as well as food banks, including The Stop on Davenport Rd. just west of Caledonia Park Rd., where Norman told him about the cucumber from heaven.

On Monday, he delivered his report to the United Nations Council on Human Rights in Geneva. He was broadcast live into The Stop’s dining hall on a movie screen.

A taste of his message about Canada to the UN:

• One in 10 families, with at least one kid under 6, are “food insecure,” meaning they don’t know if they will eat tomorrow.

• Welfare rates for a single person are less than the average rent for a single apartment in Ontario, leaving no money for food.

• The minimum wage in Canada is not a “living wage,” meaning you cannot live and eat while earning $10 an hour, without of course, turning to charity — a food bank and free meal programs, which are booming across this country.

Around one quarter of the people who participate in The Stop’s free food programs have jobs.

“Although political and civil rights are well protected, Canada is behind in regard to economic and social rights,” De Schutter said. His report will go to the United Nations Human Rights Council in April.

Now, if you’ve ever been to a lunch program at The Stop, you’ll know it makes for delicious, healthy, rowdy eating — particularly before the food is served, when everyone is jittery with hunger. And you might have thought, given De Schutter’s dry delivery and bureaucratic verbiage, the place would be going wild with distraction.

There wasn’t a peep. All 100 or so people in the room listened raptly, savouring his every word.

Nothing De Schutter said surprised them. But it was deeply gratifying to hear it from an international expert on human rights who normally reports from places like Guatemala and Cameroon.

Canada, a top OECD country that sends food aid overseas, starves many of its own people. Canada, the defender of human rights abroad, denies the human right to food of many of its own citizens!

“The poor aren’t lazy,” said Norman, 52, “they are exhausted.”
Shame is a powerful tool. It silences most poor people from speaking out. We’ve built a safety net so flimsy, most never emerge, and we shame the ones who try. Plus, we starve them, which is an even better gag rag than shame.

Norman didn’t know hunger until a couple of years ago. Then, her marriage ended and the recession hit. She couldn’t get a job.

She told me how she’d walk 2.5 hours to her caseworker’s office to save the bus fare for a tub of yoghurt — whichever one was on sale.

Then, she’d strain that to make cream cheese, because then it lasted past the best-before date.

I felt ashamed listening to her.

Why are we starving people in Canada?

When De Schutter first delivered his report to the Canadian government last year, our government ministers attacked him and his report as a “discredit to the United Nations.” Immigration Minister Jason Kenney called his report a waste of money, better used to help starving people in poor countries.

But that’s precisely the point. In rich countries like Canada, people should wish for miracles from heaven, not $2 cucumbers.

Catherine Porter’s column usually appears on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca