



2008 Budget Debate

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Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to have this opportunity to rise in the House today to provide my comments on the Conservative 2008 budget.

I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Oak Ridges—Markham.

As a result of the two year spending spree by the biggest-spending finance minister in Canadian history, there is not much to this budget. After only two years of Conservative government, the cupboard is bare.

The government has spent nearly every penny and has left no room for error. If the U.S. economy continues to worsen or if Canada faces a crisis such as SARS, we will most likely be plunged into a deficit again.

Simply put, for the next two years Canada has no contingency if things go wrong. The question becomes, is this due to gross fiscal mismanagement or is this by design? Either way, the situation Canada now faces is very worrisome and bears serious, close monitoring.

Recent media stories featured Conservative strategist Tom Flanagan crowing about: “tightening the screws on the federal government...boxing in the ability of the federal government to come up with new program ideas...The federal government is now more constrained”.

The writing on the wall is clear. The Conservatives have depleted the federal reserves and totally washed their hands of national standards only to let each province do its own thing, thereby abrogating their responsibilities and the integral role the federal government must play.

Instead of using the tools of the federal government to help Ontario transition through these economic challenges, the Minister of Finance goes on brutal, repeated, unprecedented attacks. The government is failing to fulfill its national role to help our struggling economy.

Our manufacturing sector is suffering. Sales have plummeted to a three year low. Canada's trade surplus has shrunk to its lowest levels in nearly a decade.

Despite taking marginal measures in budget 2008, the government has gone on the attack and the finance minister is outrageously trashing the investment prospects of the Ontario economy by suggesting in a public speech that Ontario is "the last place" in Canada to start a business. Ontario deserves better, much better. How does the minister expect investors to respond to his egregious comments?

Canadians would expect that with the livelihoods of families at stake the minister would be responsible and do his part to help them. I hope other provinces are taking note, because they could be next.

These are the words of a Thornhill constituent who happens to be a Conservative and who wrote to me about what the minister said in his recent attacks:

Your accusations regarding high taxes without recognizing other bigger problems associated with the slump in manufacturing is foolhardy. Time to be a deeper thinker regarding the manufacturing woes of the province of Ontario".

The government's indifference to Ontario's economic troubles goes all the way to the Prime Minister, an economist by training, whose idea of economic advice is reportedly to tell a group of soon to be unemployed auto workers in Kitchener to move to Alberta. That is no solution. It is divisive. It is offensive. It is certainly not leadership.

It is typical, however, of the Conservatives' hands off, head in the sand, "laissez-faire, I don't care" approach to the economy and other issues such as the environment. Our federal government should be doing more to stand up for Ontario in the manufacturing sector, not undermining it.

The Conservative government lacks the vision, the leadership and the will to address our critical infrastructure deficit, including investments in public transit that our cities desperately need and are crying out for.

The government does not understand how critical these investments in public transit infrastructure are to growing cities such as my riding of Thornhill to combat the congestion we face. Every day, Thornhill residents are faced with the challenges of traffic congestion sucking the life out of our economy and quality of life, polluting the very air we breathe and impacting on the quality of life of every citizen.

The Yonge Street subway extension is the one critical investment for my community of Thornhill and York region that will make a real, significant and lasting impact, yet it was not in budget 2008. That is sadly lacking and very ill-conceived.

I wholeheartedly agree with Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti's assessment of the budget's investment in public transit, when he states:

They fell dramatically short on rapid transit funding. The federal government needs to wake up to the idea that we need to have an infusion [immediately] of capital dollars. We cannot continue to take baby steps as it relates to infrastructure and rapid transit.

I have been a vocal and persistent advocate for investment in public transit and infrastructure since I was a city councillor, and a constant advocate for greater federal investments in public transit since I was elected as the member of Parliament for Thornhill. In the previous government, I strongly supported the establishment of the gas tax transfer for cities and making it definite, making it a permanent federal program. If the government needed to steal ideas, at least it stole a good one.

Canada is the only G-8 country without a national transit strategy. While the government has said that it is working on a strategy, it has stated that we will absolutely have no new funds.

It is important to understand that the first recommendation of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities for a national transit strategy was new funding. It will be interesting to see how the government implements a national transit strategy, when it finally gets around to it, that does not burden municipalities with a new layer of bureaucracy and no financial support or partnership.

When it comes to public transit, the Conservative government has more excuses than credibility. The government has utterly failed to work with Ontario on its MoveOntario 2020 program. It failed to make the partnerships that are integral to the success of Ontario and other provinces in Canada. Of the little funding it has committed to transit in the last two years, it has taken its sweet time in delivering it. The money for the Spadina subway extension is still sitting in a bank account accruing costs and creating unnecessary and irresponsible delays. This extension is needed. The Minister of Finance, the Conservatives, any federal government should understand that unequivocally.

The Conservatives take no responsibility for their failure to deliver. Instead, they play the politics of division and the blame game, which is very counterproductive and very disappointing, certainly to the residents in Ontario and to all Canadians.

The Minister of Transport is blaming the Ontario premier for having partisan interests. The Minister of Finance is unjustifiably calling the mayor of Toronto an isolationist. More name calling.

Mayor Hazel McCallion practically had to wrestle the Conservative government to the ground to get her cheque for the Mississauga rapid transit system after a year of bickering and foot dragging by the Conservative government. So much for a new era of cooperation that the Conservatives were supposed to be shepherding in. This is another Conservative broken promise.

My colleague from Ajax--Pickering has pointed out the government's hypocrisy on transit. During the city of Ottawa's

municipal elections in 2006, the then president of the Treasury Board took the unprecedented step of withholding \$200 million in federal funding for a light rail project in Ottawa even though the approvals of seven departments of the federal government, including his own, had already been secured. That is unfathomable.

The Liberal caucus has proposed a bold and innovative plan to address public transit, our roads, bridges and water treatment plants which are important across the country. We have a balanced approach that would use the surplus to pay off our national debt, as we had before, and our infrastructure deficit. That is the difference between the Conservative government and our previous government and our future.

In this year's budget, we would have spent \$3 billion on debt repayment to bring our debt to GDP ratio down to 25% by 2012 and invested the remaining \$7.2 billion in infrastructure and transit, like the province of Ontario's MoveOntario 2020 program and the recently announced B.C. transit plan.

While debt repayment remains a key Liberal priority, we cannot and must not allow our communities to suffer, leaving a legacy of crumbling bridges, congested roads and a record-breaking number of smog days. There is too much at stake for Canadians.

U.S. senator, Joe Biden, likes to say that his father taught him, "Show me your budget and I'll show you what you value". Let us look at the budget and see how much the government values protecting the health and safety of Canadians.

Of the 2008 initiatives for protecting the health and safety of Canadians, the government spends a total of \$209 million, which accounts for about 3.5% of all spending. That certainly does not sound to me or to Canadians like a government that values protecting the health and safety of Canadians at all.

There is at least some money being put aside toward Canada's safety system for food, consumer products and health products. I hear my constituents' concerns about pesticides in their food and the safety of toy imports and baby products. Canadians need to know that the products they use meet the highest of standards. I am

concerned that the \$113 million set aside over two years will not be enough for such important safety concerns. These concerns deserve and warrant the appropriate allocation of funding and attention. I will definitely be following the progress of this initiative very closely.

Thousands of products coming across our borders every day could potentially harm Canadians. My constituents consistently tell me that they want to be certain that the regulations on food, consumer products and health products meet the highest standards.

I frequently hear concerns about the secretiveness of the Security and Prosperity Partnership and the fear that it may result in lower safety standards. I have raised the issue directly with the Minister of Health to ensure that we not only maintain our high standards in this area but we take even greater steps forward to improve and strengthen them.

Canadians and Thornhill residents will not forget that the government campaigned on health care as being one of its top priorities and yet, in this budget, protecting the health and safety of Canadians only accounts for 3.5% of 2008 initiative spending. However, the government's Minister of Health is the same Ontario minister who gutted our health care system, closed hospitals and fired nurses. Unfortunately, it may not be surprising that the government has spent so little of budget 2008 initiatives on protecting the health and safety of Canadians.