

Liberals promise to extend emergency COVID-19 supports, build national childcare program in throne speech ^[1]

'This is no time for austerity,' speech says in outlining government's pandemic response and recovery plan

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EXCERPTS

The Liberal government is promising to extend emergency support for Canadians hit by the COVID-19 crisis while building a more resilient economy that empowers women, fights climate change and tackles systemic racism.

It also says it plans to impose criminal penalties for those who neglect vulnerable, elderly Canadians after the pandemic exposed shocking gaps in some long-term care facilities.

Calling its roadmap an "ambitious plan for an unprecedented reality," the plan outlined in today's speech from the throne compares the current challenges to the wars and economic collapses endured by previous generations.

"The economic impact of COVID-19 on Canadians has already been worse than the 2008 financial crisis. These consequences will not be short-lived," said Gov. Gen. Julie Payette, reading from the speech in the Senate Chamber.

"This is not the time for austerity."

Wage subsidy to be extended

The government is promising to expand supports for struggling businesses and to extend the wage subsidy program until next summer. That program, which aims to keep employees on the payroll to ensure a smooth post-pandemic economic transition, covers 75 per cent of employee wages, up to \$847 a week.

The wage subsidy extension is part of the government's vow to create a million jobs, which would restore employment to pre-pandemic levels. It is also promising to "scale up" its strategy to help young people gain skills and find jobs.

The speech says that tackling the climate change crisis will be a "cornerstone" of the government's plan and commits to creating jobs through retrofitting homes and buildings while cutting energy costs for families and businesses.

"It is no small task to build a stronger, more resilient country. It will take hard work. It will require a commitment to finding common ground," Payette read from the speech.

While Canada entered the pandemic in a strong financial position, unemployment is now in the double digits and underemployment is high, Payette said, adding that women, racialized Canadians and young people have borne the brunt of job losses.

The government also signalled a plan to make a "significant, long-term, sustained" investment in a national early learning and child care system.

"Many women have bravely served on the frontlines of this crisis, in our communities or by shouldering the burden of unpaid care work at home," Payette said, reading from the speech.

"We must not let the legacy of the pandemic be one of rolling back the clock on women's participation in the workforce, nor one of backtracking on the social and political gains women and allies have fought so hard to secure."

National standards for long-term care

The government is also pledging to address inadequate care and dire conditions in some long-term care facilities — conditions that were exposed by the pandemic. It says it will work with the provinces and territories to establish national standards of care, and to provide additional supports to people who want to stay in their homes longer.

"Elders deserve to be safe, respected, and live in dignity," Payette said. "Although long-term care falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, the federal government will take any action it can to support seniors while working alongside the provinces and territories."

The government also is promising to work to amend the Criminal Code to penalize those who neglect seniors in their care and put them in

danger.

The government is also eyeing a new disability benefit, which would be modelled after the guaranteed income supplement (GIS) for seniors, as well as a new employment strategy for people with disabilities.

The government is promising to address systemic racism against racialized communities and Indigenous peoples by cracking down on online hate, improving data collection and implementing an action plan for diversity hires in the public service.

It's also promising changes to help eliminate discrimination in policing and the justice system.

Earlier today, the federal Conservatives said they're looking for signs that the Liberal government will take steps to rein in spending and unite Canadians in today's speech from the throne.

Deputy Conservative Leader Candice Bergen and Conservative House Leader Gerard Deltell held a news conference ahead of today's speech, which is now being delivered by Gov. Gen. Julie Payette, to lay out their expectations for the government's priorities.

The speech will be followed by an address to the nation at 6:30 p.m. ET from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. It's not yet clear who will give the Conservative Party's formal televised response to the speech, since leader Erin O'Toole is in self-isolation after testing positive for COVID-19.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh will respond on behalf of his party, as will Yves-François Blanchet, leader of the Bloc Québécois. Blanchet has tested positive for COVID-19, along with his spouse. O'Toole's spouse, Rebecca O'Toole, also has tested positive.

Bergen said emergency spending was required to get Canadians through the pandemic crisis that shut down businesses and threw millions of people out of work — but the government must now better manage the nation's finances and take control of a ballooning deficit.

"We believe that support is needed but there has to be fiscal restraint," she said. "We'd like to see some fiscal management and some indication that the government understands this and will begin to manage the finances of the country in a responsible way."

Deltell said emergency measures were necessary but the Liberal government engaged in "superfluous" spending, making announcements about new money "every day, every week."

Bergen said Liberal policies have failed to help many sectors, including manufacturing, fishing and forestry. She said they also have pitted Canadians against one another and she's looking for a Liberal promise to unite Canadians with a message of hope.

Ethics controversy simmers

The throne speech comes as the Liberal government tries to get past an ethics controversy over the government's decision to grant WE Charity a contract to manage a student volunteer grant program. Trudeau did not recuse himself from discussions on the contract, even though members of his family had close ties to the organization.

Parliament reopens today after Trudeau prorogued Parliament last month. At the time, the PM said the move was necessary to reset a government agenda knocked off-course by the global pandemic.

The session kicks off with a scaled-back throne speech ceremony involving a smaller number of attendees in the Senate chamber, due to physical distancing rules.

Deltell said that while Canadians do not want an election right now, the Conservatives will not prop up the government if it fails to address critical priorities in the throne speech. A confidence vote on the speech could trigger an election.

"If it's bad for Canadians ... we will not be supporting it," Deltell said.

The Conservatives are also pushing for more money for health transfers to the provinces, as well as rapid testing to detect COVID-19 as some jurisdictions struggle with long waits for tests.

Deltell questioned why Trudeau was delivering an address to the nation on the same day as the throne speech, suggesting it could be meant to draw maximum media attention and distract people from the government's failings.

PM must 'jolt' people into action

Samir Gupta, a respirologist at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, said he hopes the prime minister will "jolt people into action" as COVID-19 infections rise across the country. He said Trudeau must not sugarcoat the crisis and should ask Canadians to make sacrifices to save lives.

"This can go sideways very easily," he told CBC News Network.

On Tuesday, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said Canada is at a "crossroads" in its pandemic battle and that the behaviour of individual Canadians will decide whether there's a massive spike in COVID-19 cases coming.

Presenting new modelling on infection projections, she warned that if Canadians don't step up preventative measures, the virus could spread out of control and trigger a wave of infections bigger than the first one.

According to the projections, new cases could climb to more than 5,000 daily by October — about triple the number the nation saw in the spring.

"With minimal controls, the virus is capable of surging into a very sharp and intense peak because most Canadians don't have immunity to

the virus," Tam said.a

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