

Federal budget 2012: Details show how Canadian PM Stephen Harper changing government ^[1]

Author: Whittington, Les

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EXCERPTS:

OTTAWA-From laid-off government workers to green activists to anti-poverty advocates, Canadians are discovering the full implications of the federal budget as the Conservatives reveal details of their far-reaching economic and social agenda.

While Finance Minister Jim Flaherty played down the impact last month, the measures sprinkled through the 498-page package are proving to be a road map to the Conservative majority's plan to fundamentally reshape and shrink Ottawa's role in Canada.

The budget takes a scattergun approach to reducing the federal government's capabilities and responsibilities - eroding future pension expenditures, reducing food and environmental scrutiny, axing federal government jobs and chipping away at support for culture, health, foreign aid and the poor.

"Most of what we see is certainly a decreased interest in an active federal role in shaping social policy," said Laurel Rothman, national co-ordinator for Campaign 2000, a Toronto-based non-profit network fighting child poverty.

"Whether it's on children, whether it's aging, whether it's affordable housing, whether it's affordable child care, we need an active and involved federal government to set broad frameworks in social policy direction and to help pay for it," she said. The Conservative government "seems to be going in an opposition direction," Rothman remarked.

Among the emerging details, one of the most striking is Prime Minister Stephen Harper's move to quietly give himself the power to approve major energy projects like the Northern Gateway pipeline, even if regulatory bodies turn them down on environmental grounds.

Buried in the fine print of the natural resource strategy first mooted in the budget, it says the Conservatives will "establish clearer accountability for decisions on major pipeline projects in the national interest by giving government authority to make the 'go/no go' decisions, based on the recommendations of the National Energy Board (NEB)."

To environmentalists and aboriginal people worried about supertankers picking up tarsands crude from the planned Northern Gateway pipeline, Harper's surprise decision to acquire the power to override the 53-year-old, independent NEB is alarming.

Harper has already declared the proposed oil pipeline through the Rockies to Kitimat on the B.C. coast a matter of national interest, and the government is streamlining the NEB hearings on Northern Gateway.

"They've lost all pretense of having any sense of responsibility to future generations or to environmental protection at all," said Green Party leader Elizabeth May. "I'm watching the Harper government undo decades of work to have a clear process that fulfils federal constitutional responsibilities for proper environmental review."

How these changes and others in the budget will affect the lives of Canadians will not be fully known for months, perhaps years. But already the impact is being felt across the country. Among the cuts so far:

- Ending the National Council of Welfare, which advises government on poverty. It cost \$1 million a year.
- Closing the National Aboriginal Health Organization, which with a \$4.4-million budget worked to promote the health of native people.
- Trimming CBC funding by \$115 million.
- Cutting funding for Transport Canada, which regulates airline safety, by \$152 million, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency by \$56 million.
- Scrapping the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, a \$5.2-million-a-year panel created by Brian Mulroney's government.
- Eliminating the Katimavik youth program.
- Cutting 1,026 positions at the Canada Border Services Agency.

Taking \$380 million, or 7.5 per cent, out of Canada's foreign aid budget.

- Eliminating 2,000 professionals and scientists, most of whom were engaged in efforts to protect the safety of Canadians in such fields as

food and product testing and environmental monitoring, according to their union.

- In all, the government says it will chop 19,200 positions amid \$5.2 billion in spending reduction over three years. But some analysts say the job reductions will be much larger. And Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page says that, including previous budget reductions, cuts will total \$37 billion over five years.
- The budget also will make it harder for future seniors to collect pension benefits and, according to government sources, clamp down on recipients of Employment Insurance to make sure they don't turn down job offers.

Portrayed by Harper as a transformative move to address Canadians' disproportionate focus on "our services and entitlements," the cuts are part of the Conservatives' plan to wipe out the \$21-billion budget deficit by 2015.

But taking into account Harper's recent decision to cap future federal health-care funding for the provinces, some see the budget as a major step in a broader, long-term Conservative strategy.

In this view, Harper's underlying goal is nothing less than the winding down of large parts of the role of the federal government in social and economic areas built up by successive Liberal governments.

"This budget gives pretty clear signals of a different Canada," Alex Himelfarb, former senior federal public servant and director of York University's Glendon School of Public and International Affairs, said in a recent analysis.

The budget is "about redefining the purpose of government and undoing, brick by brick, in the slowest of motion, but inexorably, the institutions and programs built over decades following the Second World War, by governments of quite different stripes," Himelfarb said.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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