

UN food envoy slaps Ottawa on scrapping census and effect of EU trade talks ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

OTTAWA - The United Nations right-to-food envoy says the Harper government's controversial decisions to scrap the long-form census and negotiate a free trade deal with Europe will make it more difficult to fight poverty in Canada.

Those are among the many cutting observations made by Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations' special rapporteur on the right to food, who will release his report Monday in Geneva at a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council.

The report calls on Ottawa to create a national food strategy to fight hunger among a growing number of vulnerable groups, including aboriginals and people struggling to make ends meet on social assistance. It says the strategy should spell out the levels of responsibility between federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Throughout the 21-page report, De Schutter also takes direct aim at some of the core items of the Harper government's agenda, saying they undermine access to food.

These include the controversial decision to cancel the long-form census in 2009, the ongoing Canada-EU free trade negotiations, the scrapping of the Canadian Wheat Board, and how Ottawa oversees the money it transfers to the provinces for social services.

The report essentially serves as De Schutter's rebuttal to the bitter and personal public criticism he faced from Harper cabinet ministers during his 11-day fact finding visit to Canada last May.

Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq said De Schutter was "ill-informed" and "patronizing." Immigration Minister Jason Kenney called him "completely ridiculous."

De Schutter's report is sure to magnify the disdain the Harper government has directed at UN agencies and processes in recent years.

In his report, De Schutter aligns himself directly with government critics who viewed the scrapping of the 35-year-old long-form census as an attack on the ability of Statistics Canada to compile an analytical portrait of the country.

"First, in order to effectively combat hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition, it is necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of who is hungry, food-insecure and malnourished," the report says.

"The special rapporteur is concerned that changes in the current budget will make the collection and analysis of data more complicated, particularly by changes to data collection through the elimination of the requirement for individuals to complete the long-form census."

The report also raises concerns about the dismantling of the National Council of Welfare, because it "provided a forum for data collection and comparison of ... social assistance rates across the country."

If the government had the benefit of that information, the report says, it could "support evidence-based policies that move towards the eradication of hunger and malnutrition, including obesity, and to monitor progress."

De Schutter also aligns himself with critics of the negotiations to craft a comprehensive free trade pact between Canada and the European Union — a deal that Ottawa hoped to have finalized by the end of last year.

His report says initiatives to improve food and nutrition and promote local markets, including "buy local" initiatives, might be negatively affected by the provisions of the proposed trade pact.

"They may also be undermined by the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with the European Union, currently in draft form, which would prohibit municipal governments from using procurement of goods and services valued over \$340,000 in a way that favours local or Canadian goods, services or labour," the report states.

"Numerous municipalities across the country have opposed this restriction on the ability of local authorities to promote urban-rural linkages and local economic development through institutional purchasing, and have requested exemptions."

De Schutter also criticizes the government for ending the monopoly of the Canadian Wheat Board last year, and comes down firmly in favour of Canada's various supply management schemes in dairy, poultry and eggs.

Supply management is an obstacle in the Canada-EU free trade negotiations and is a contentious issue for Canada as it tries to forge a Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal.

"In contrast, the various supply management schemes in dairy, poultry and eggs present advantages both for food producers and taxpayers," says De Schutter's report.

"These legislated marketing tools have been designed to impose disciplines on sellers at a commodity-specific level and to replace a farmer-against-farmer competitiveness with a united and concerted effort by farmers to sell collectively for mutual advantage."

The report also reiterates De Schutter's earlier criticism of Ottawa for failing to ensure provinces spend transfer payments on social services.

The report says Canada has fared "reasonably well compared to its peers" in weathering the global economic downturn, "however, the gaps between those living in poverty and the middle- and high-income segments of the population are widening."

It calls on the federal government to do more in a time of relative prosperity.

It concludes that a growing number of people across Canada remain unable to meet their basic food needs.

De Schutter said a significant number of people are living on welfare and, because of the increased cost of housing, they don't have adequate access to a well-balanced diet.

In 2007-08, 7.7 per cent of households reported experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity. That figure rose to 8.2 per cent in 2011.

Food banks, the report says, are growing to address the widening gap.

"The inadequacy of social protection schemes to meet the basic needs of households has precipitated the proliferation of private and charity-based food aid."

The report says Canada is not meeting its obligations under international conventions it has signed.

It singles out Canada for not acknowledging the right to food under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

"The special rapporteur is concerned about the growing gap between Canada's international human rights commitments and their implementation domestically," the report says.

De Schutter said last year that his report will play a role in defining Canada's international reputation and will come up during assessments of Canada's human rights protections.

Ottawa, however, has repeatedly dismissed appeals for national strategies on poverty and housing, saying that's an issue best left to the provinces. Past pleas to the UN by First Nations for changes to public policy have also fallen on deaf ears.

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