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Promises of solidarity wither when budget introduced Gov't reaps savings by cutting foreign aid

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OTTAWA - It is unusual for a Conservative Throne Speech to use the word "solidarity" in Catholic social doctrine sense, but the word appeared twice in Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean's opening sentences March 3.

"I know Canadians will continue to care, and that spirit of solidarity will redefine their sense of sharing as efforts are made to support the economic recovery," said Jean, in a speech which highlighted managing the fragile recovery, job creation and looking ahead to balancing the budget.

Joe Gunn, executive director of Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ), lauded the focus on jobs, economic growth and helping youth make the transition to the new economy.

"Solidarity with people who are struggling through this recession is absolutely key," he said. "When you have a million and a half people who are unemployed in this country, that really hurts."

HUMAN SPIRIT

Gunn, a former director of the social affairs secretariat at the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB), noted how the bishops have spoken many times on "what unemployment does to the human spirit."

But Gunn found that throne speech's vision of green jobs, care of the environment, commitment to the Copenhagen climate change agreement and aid to the developing world did not appear in the budget.

"This budget is not high on creativity," he said. "It's not overly negative either, but it leaves all the heavy lifting to next year and beyond."

The CPJ has proposed raising the GST by a percentage point or two to not only address the budget deficit, but to ensure Canada can meet its commitments to the developing world.

Gunn found the budget's freeze on international development shocking. "The idea that foreign aid represents a quarter of all the money to be cut is quite astounding really."

"I really think this is a challenge for Canadian churches because there isn't a constituency of voters who represent the poor of the world if it is not the Christian community," he said. "I hope we have very active leadership to try to convince the government to reconsider that."

Catholic Civil Rights League National Capital Area director Richard Bastien, an economist who spent 31 years as an advisor to the federal finance department, said he would prefer to see the government make deeper spending cuts before raising taxes.

BALANCED BUDGET

"The thrust of the budget is good," he said. "It's one that I certainly support because it focuses on the need to come back to a balanced budget."

But he said the four-year period to get back to a balanced budget is too long.

"Given the uncertainty about the future growth of the Canadian economy, we should be keeping more conservative, more determined to cut back on public spending," he said.

While Gunn is concerned about rising poverty rates and the plight of Canadians who will soon see their employment insurance benefit ends, Bastien said the government must develop a strategy to help Canadians learn they cannot rely on government hand-outs and big government programs.

According to the Institute of Marriage and Family (IMFC) Canada's Dave Quist, the speech, which sets the agenda for the new session of Parliament, mentioned "family" 20 times.

That view echoes the Catholic social teaching on subsidiarity - that higher levels of society such as government should help and support lower levels such as the family but not usurp their roles.

BABY STEPS

Quist said the budget contained "baby steps" towards improving the lives of families by allowing single parents to choose to have the Universal Child Care Benefit declared by one of their children. This would eliminate the clawback on taxes.

The IMFC has advocated income splitting for families with one income earner - right now two-income families get a significant tax break. Quist sees the change for single parent families as a move towards income splitting.

Both Quist and Pennings expressed disappointment the government did not include a higher tax credit for charitable giving.

Quist pointed out that charities and civil society often do a much better job than governments at helping to alleviate social problems such as drug addiction and alcoholism.