

Government vows broad changes to public service in throne speech



Governor General David Johnston delivers the Speech from the Throne in the Senate Chamber on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Wednesday October 16, 2013. Photograph by: Sean Kilpatrick , THE CANADIAN PRESS

By Kathryn May, **OTTAWA CITIZEN** October 17, 2013

OTTAWA — The Conservative government opened Wednesday’s throne speech with an agenda for transforming Canada’s public service that set the stage for a spending freeze, more job cuts, and a stormy round of contract talks with federal unions over concessions in sick leave and other benefits.

Bureaucrats and unions alike were braced for what some see as “public-service bashing,” with the government continuing its drive to curb spending and bring public service compensation in line with the private sector, but the nine points read by Gov. Gen. David Johnston to a packed Senate chamber “to reduce the size and cost of government” went further than was expected.

The speech sets the stage for what will be the fourth round of spending cuts since the Conservatives came to power with another cycle of “targeted spending reductions” and a continuation of the freeze on departmental operational budgets that will put the brakes on any further hiring. The government also said it intends to:

- Reform the way the federal system manages spending;
- Review federal assets for possible sale;
- Reform the existing disability plans and “sick leave entitlements”;

- Amend the Public Service Labour Relations Act to ensure “an affordable, modern and high-performing” public service;

- Increase performance management to provide better and cheaper service to Canadians and reward effective employees; and

- Improve efficiency, such as moving to a single email system for all of government.

Departments are still digesting billions of dollars in cuts to their operational budgets and the Conservatives are looking for more. It's unclear how those savings in “internal government spending” will be achieved but the government hinted it has plans for efficiency savings from IT consolidation, such as reducing data centres, human resources departments or finance operations.

“This sounds like budget 2012 all over again, but worse because they have already taken out more than 19,200 jobs and this is more of the same,” said Ron Cochrane, co-chair of the joint union-management National Joint Council.

Many argue the public service has already been put through the wringer for savings and all the easy reductions are gone. The new cuts will dig deep, affect the “integrity” of existing programs and services, and will mean more layoffs.

Several senior bureaucrats say efficiency savings take years to implement, but politically it's a great strategy in the lead-up to the 2015 election. The government looks like they are coming down hard on the public service, reducing its size and costs, but the government won't do the hard work of deciding what programs and jobs to eliminate. Instead, it will take the money out of department budgets and leave it up to deputy ministers to decide where to cut.

“This is a hit list on the public service and the public services they deliver, and there is no mention of the process that will be used to involve public servants on what should be preserved ... They went much further than many of us expected with a recipe to carve out public services and with all kinds of Trojan horses,” said Paul Dewar, the NDP MP for Ottawa Centre.

“This will deeply affect our community and, make no mistake, the work people are doing now is still work that will have to be done. I want to know if the Conservative MPs in this town contributed to and support this agenda,” said Dewar.

The biggest increase in the size of the public service over the past decade came under the Conservative watch from 2006 to 2011 — peaking in 2010 — when some 45,000 jobs were added. Some 20,000 jobs have been reduced since then. Most of these jobs were added in priority areas such as security, defence and corrections.

Gary Corbett, president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, said the government's goal for savings and efficiency is “laudable” and one supported by most bureaucrats. But rather than work with the public service, he says the government “plays to their base” and portrays the public service as “train wreck.”

Some of the government's intentions are a restatement of initiatives already underway, such as a plan to scrap the existing accumulated sick leave regime and replace it with a new short-term disability plan. It has also put retired public servants on notice that it wants to double their share of the cost for the public service health plan. It has already laid out plans for a new performance management regime that is supposed to reward the stars in the bureaucracy and get rid of non-performers.

Robyn Benson, president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, said she was "dismayed" the government would use performance management as a "cost reduction tactic."

"This is unacceptable. We have had performance management programs in the federal government for years. Using performance as a smokescreen for further downsizing is dishonest and unfair to the hard-working members of the public service."

It's unclear what the Conservatives are taking aim at in the Public Service Labour Relations Act. The government faced several arbitration rulings during contract disputes with employees that forced it to pay more than the 5.3 per cent wage increase it earmarked for all employees over the past three years. Some say the government may want to change the act so that won't happen again.

"The Public Service Labour Relations Act is the cornerstone of positive labour relations between employees and their employer," said Benson. "The government cannot enact any reforms to the Act without consulting with bargaining agents. We will not accept any infringement or erosion of our members' rights. Collective bargaining is a democratic right and it works."

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Conservatives vow to amend public service labour act

Public service unions worried about 'vague' promise to change act

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Gov. Gen. David Johnston reads the throne speech in the Senate chamber as Prime Minister Stephen Harper looks on. (Reuters)

Wednesday's throne speech left a public sector union concerned about a promise to amend the law governing the relationship between the public service and the Treasury Board.

The Conservatives once again promised to make further reductions to spending within government, and the speech reiterated changes announced in the spring about reforming sick days and performance evaluations.

But the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) said it was caught off guard by promised changes to the Public Service Labour Relations Act.

"We certainly find it pretty vague and very disappointing," said PSAC president Robyn Benson.

The act covers bargaining rights, collective bargaining, grievances, arbitration, conciliation and more.

The goal of the changes to the act, according to the speech, "is to ensure that the public service is affordable, modern and high-performing."

Robyn Benson, president of PSAC, said changing the act would be significant, especially because her union goes into collective bargaining next year.

"We're pretty surprised that it's there, and it doesn't really say what's going to happen with it," she said.

Benson said she planned to call Treasury Board president Tony Clement today to try to find out what changing the law would entail specifically.