

Budget cuts will reduce service to the public, say unions, opposition

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Budget cuts unveiled Thursday could put safety at risk and could affect service to the public, warn the unions who represent federal government workers.

Gary Corbett, president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, said things like food labelling are important safety issues and there have been problems in the past such as contaminated milk from China.

“Labelling is important for people to know what they are eating, so it is part of the safety regime.”

Corbett said the budget cuts will hit the Ottawa area hard – especially since one job in the public sector tends to generate a job in the private sector.

“If it’s one for one, that’s more like 40,000 jobs in the National Capital Region. I think it’s devastating.”

Corbett predicted many public servants will tighten their purse strings when it comes to such big purchases as houses and cars. “If I was one of those people, I would be very careful not to spend money.”

Corbett said the cuts won’t all take place at once but he expects to start getting notification of cuts in coming weeks. Once those cuts begin, the union will make sure Canadians know the impact on services to the public.

Patty Ducharme, national executive vice-president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, said the budget is austere, ideological and comes after a series of previous cuts to government departments. “That is going to have a huge impact on services to the public.”

Ducharme said the cuts will have an impact on food safety, border security, environmental deregulation. “It’s a huge issue. We’re all going to pay the price at some point in the future.”

Ducharme said the union will lobby individual members of Parliament, pointing out the impact of the cuts.

“Hopefully some members will be willing to soften some of the blows here. I’m not particularly optimistic. This is a government that doesn’t believe in the role of government for Canadians. But if nothing else we can put those members of Parliament on notice that in four years time we’ll be working to make sure that they don’t get back into office.”

Marco Mendicino, president of the Association of Justice Counsel which represents 2,700 federal prosecutors and department of justice lawyers, said it is difficult to reconcile the government’s crime agenda with its plans to cut justice department spending by 8.6 per cent.

“It is very difficult to square those cuts with the long-term priority of law and order.”

Mendicino also questioned how the government can say in the budget it won't build any new prisons at the same time that it is beefing up the penalties for crime.

"I can tell you here in Ontario in many of the institutions we're seeing double and triple bunking, so we're running out of space at a time when the government is introducing mandatory minimums and getting tougher on pre-trial custody."

For Captain Daniel Slunder, chairman of the Canadian Federal Pilots Association, the biggest issue for his members is the change in the retirement age, bumping it up to 65 from 60 for new hires.

Slunder said the union is already dealing with pilots who have to go on stress leave in their late 50s.

Federal party leaders were also critical of the planned cuts.

"They are cutting things as essential to the public as food safety, as transportation safety," said NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair. "Those are the kinds of things that are being cut right now."

Liberal Leader Bob Rae said the cuts to fisheries and oceans, environment and agriculture will affect the government's ability to serve Canadians in those areas.

Meanwhile, the government hasn't touched spending in areas like ministerial office budgets or government advertising, he pointed out. "Show me where there are cuts in government advertising. Nowhere. This government is spending more on government advertising than any government in the history of Canada and they're not cutting a nickel from government advertising – not a penny."

Green Party Leader Elizabeth May said the budget will clear the way for fossil fuel expansion, curtail reviews and drive development. She predicts scientists who measure environmental impacts will be cut while at the same time the government appears to be favoring research that helps business.

The decision to eliminate the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, a "cautiously critical entity" is an attempt to gag critics, she said.

"It's not driven by trying to save money. The roundtable's whole budget is \$5 million. They spent \$5 million this year on celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Grey Cup."

Ray Zwicker, national vice-president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees, said his union which represents 14,000 government analysts and translators will have to sit down and analyse the impact on its members.

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