

Show Me the Money: Stephen Harper's Budget Sleight of Hand

Elizabeth May

In the years since Elizabeth May's first budget lock-up, federal budgets have gone from being economic blueprints for the betterment of Canadian life, she writes, to being amalgamations of election promises and pseudo-promises. As leader of the federal Green Party, May exercises her imperative to underscore the lack of a single mention of climate change in Joe Oliver's budget. As a Canadian, she has other complaints, too.

I have been going into lock-ups and reading budgets for years—and years.

I remember the biggest, greenest budget—it was the Mulroney government's Green Plan in Michael Wilson's 1990 budget; a five-year, \$3 billion commitment.

A very close second was Ralph Goodale's 2005 budget—another multi-billion commitment for climate action—including the first gas tax commitment to municipalities, seed money for a major climate fund, infrastructure and eco-energy/energy efficiency.

Remembering only made it worse when Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq said, the day after Joe Oliver's first budget, that it was the most environmental in Canada's history.

To call that a “lie” would be to dignify it with gravitas. But we are so used to budgets that are no longer real, we hardly notice anymore.

When I was executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada, budgets were organized along the lines of government departments. There were tables and charts showing what those departments received over the previous few years and projections for the next few years. I went into lock-ups looking to see how we were faring with our 1992 Rio commitments – were we getting close to raising development assistance to 0.7 per cent of GDP? Was there new spending to promote

renewable energy, increase efficiency and invest in our communities?

These days, the budget is a nearly incomprehensible amalgamation of promises and pseudo-promises—a hodgepodge of election inducements rather than a coherent, prudent plan for Canada's future economic and social health.

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But this budget represents a new low. The existence of an overseas development program is never mentioned. This even though we were told just weeks ago in the House, during the debate on the extended mission in Iraq and Syria, that the mission included a generous contribution to address the humanitarian crisis. With \$360 million in 2015-16 for

the bombing campaign, not a penny is mentioned for aid. No mention is made of development assistance anywhere in the world. In the two previous years' budgets, foreign aid was cut by \$670 million. And, of course, in the omnibus budget bill, the Canadian International Development Agency was eliminated and merged into the Department of Foreign Affairs. Now, we realize how truly erased CIDA has been. Overseas development assistance is now 0.23 per cent of GDP; less than half what it was when Brian Mulroney recommitted Canada at the Rio Summit to the target of 0.7 per cent of GDP.

There is equally—notoriously—no mention of climate change. Not even a whiff of a suggestion that Canada's government has noticed increasingly severe weather events, nor our abysmal failure to move toward greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions pledged by Stephen Harper in Copenhagen six years ago. Instead, the budget brings fresh proof of the meaning of Harper's promises. In 2009, at the Pittsburgh G20 Summit, Stephen Harper pledged to stop subsidizing fossil fuels. Not only are subsidies still flowing to the oil sands, Budget 2015 opens up a whole new tax benefit for the fracking and LNG industry.

Seven months from now in Paris, Canada will join the global negotiations for a meaningful, comprehensive treaty to move the world away from fossil fuel depen-



Green Party Leader Elizabeth May notes there isn't a single mention of climate change in Budget 2015, an indictment of the Harper government's failure on the environment. House of Commons photo

dence. COP21 (the 21st Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) will take place in the last week of November and first week of December in Paris. This is a deadline with no chance of “do-overs.” The atmosphere is already so overloaded with GHG that we have one last chance to reduce emissions sufficiently to avoid increasingly catastrophic impacts.

Canada will be expected to step up. We are already overdue in tabling our planned commitment with the UN climate office. The “intended nationally determined contributions” were due in the first quarter of 2015. Missing that deadline and ignoring climate in the budget have made it clear where Stephen Harper thinks climate change belongs: somewhere well below his commitment to oil sands expansion.

Having put all its eggs in the bitumen basket for so long, the Harper government reacted to low oil prices like a bunny in the headlights—delaying the budget by months while ignoring economic opportunities. In the Green Party's pre-budget submission, we had urged the finance minister to move quickly to provide needed boosts for those sectors of our economy that benefit from the low dollar—specifically tourism, film and television production, and manufacturing. While the budget acknowledges that tourism is a significant sector of our economy, no funding is committed. It was this prime minister who cancelled all advertising in the US market to promote Canada as a tourism destination, yet we have missed the chance to boost our visibility as a destination in advance of the 2015 summer season, and at a time when the devalued loonie is a strong selling

point to American tourists.

One great tourist draw, our national parks system, has suffered deep cuts. This budget includes a two-page spread extolling the benefits of the national parks but includes no new funding for Parks Canada.

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The same is true for digital infrastructure, mental health, the Consumer Protection Framework, and credit unions. Lovely write-ups and discussion of the exciting future plans; but no funding. This is new, even in the Harper era.

Above all, the fundamental principle that Parliament controls the public purse is utterly forgotten. The omnibus bill that allowed the PMO to control even that, through the “deeming” of the fact of Parliamentary review of billions of dollars of spending, must be repealed. Members of Parliament must be able to read a budget and know what it says. For now, I cannot call this volume a “budget.” It is no longer even called a budget by the government, but the “Economic Action Plan 2015” subtitled “STRONG LEADERSHIP: a balanced budget, low-tax plan for Jobs, Growth and Security.”

It is Harper's annual big, thick brochure. After the election, let us hope we can renew the notion of fiscal planning for the wellbeing of Canada—for this generation and the next—as a shared goal of serious people. **P**

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