



HOUSE OF COMMONS HANSARD

DEBATE ON BUDGET

JOHN CUMMINS, M.P.

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Mr. John Cummins (Delta—South Richmond, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to speak to the budget debate here today. The issues I would like to address are issues related to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Coast Guard, which is part of that organization.

In the event that a large aircraft comes up short in the tidal flats off Vancouver International Airport, the emergency plan for the Vancouver airport requires that two hovercraft be dispensed to bring rescue craft and provide rescue services to that downed aircraft. Hovercraft are the only vessels capable of entering on the tidal flats and of course their presence is almost mandatory, or required, I should say, to effect a rescue.

In the past, we did have two hovercraft available at the Sea Island Coast Guard base. In October 2002, one of those hovercraft was taken out of service due to old age. We were promised a replacement by December of that year. We are still waiting for that replacement. The latest estimate is that it will not be ready until June of this year.

The remaining hovercraft was taken out of service about a month ago due to a serious mechanical problem. It will not be available for service again for probably up to three months. This means that there is no hovercraft available to effect a rescue in the tidal flats off Vancouver, either for an accident at the airport or for any other tragedy that could occur on that very large expanse of water.

Plan B of the rescue plan in the tidal flats called for Department of National Defence search and rescue to provide a Cormorant helicopter to bring rescue rafts to the downed aircraft, but those same planes, those Cormorants, have now been taken out of service and are available to fly only for emergency or rescue services because of their mechanical problems.

So the fact of the matter is that there is no Coast Guard availability for the tidal flats off Vancouver. Absolutely no rescue service whatsoever is available. That, I think, is a very real condemnation of the government's failure in this regard.

I have a copy of the minister's briefing book, which was prepared for the new fisheries minister, the minister responsible for the Coast Guard, and it confirms what I have said. In that briefing note, the minister is told:

The Canadian Coast Guard's on the water capacity to support the government's marine priorities and programs, and marine security, is eroding rapidly. A strong government commitment is needed to reverse this.

The briefing note goes on to state:

...the state of the large vessels in the Coast Guard fleet requires an immediate investment decision by the government--

Thus, the minister has been advised by his own department of the lack of readiness of the Coast Guard due to funding cuts.

However, the funding cuts are not restricted to the Coast Guard. John Fraser, the head of the Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, noted recently in an annual report that:

Further reductions...fundamentally undermine the capacity to monitor salmon stocks and identify those in need of conservation measures.

Of course in this report we are talking about the west coast fisheries, particularly the salmon fishery. Fraser goes on to say:

The effective management of the salmon resource is confounded and undermined by the downsizing of staff and budgets by both levels of government at the same time.

He goes on to state:

The prospect of even larger reductions in 2004 makes it likely that effective management of Pacific salmon stocks will be further diminished.

The briefing book the minister received on becoming minister gave him ample warning about the problems that John Fraser is now warning us about, another reason why we needed the departmental spending plans, which should have been provided in a more timely fashion. However, let us see how the minister was advised.

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The briefing book stated that several internal challenges “threatened the long-term sustainability of DFO's services”.

The notes claim “chronic financial pressures”, some of which date back to program review and “budget shortfalls” in recent years. The notes state “growing program and workload pressures to deliver an increasing range of services”.

The briefing notes go on to say that there were established plans to reduce DFO's staffing by "not filling 15 percent of the positions that will be vacant over the next two years".

All of that underscores the comments made by Mr. Fraser that the funding cuts by the government will undermine the department's ability to manage and protect the salmon resource on the west coast.

That is further illustrated by the point that DFO was identified as being part of the first round of Treasury Board Secretariat led expenditure and management reviews and was required to contribute \$9 million to the \$1 billion federal reallocation exercises in the year 2003-04.

DFO will be required again to cut further to support the government spending cuts. I think it has already been cut to the bone as we have illustrated here with a report from the Coast Guard and from the minister's briefing notes on the state of the salmon fishery on the west coast.

These cuts are not restricted to the west coast. The briefing notes prepared for the minister state:

Overfishing and the increasing trend of non-compliance with NAFO measures by foreign fishing vessels outside Canadian waters is a serious concern to the Government. They are threats to conservation and jeopardize the rebuilding of important straddling fish stocks.

These briefing notes also state:

Directed fishing for fish stocks under moratoria (e.g. Grand Banks American plaice), the use of small mesh gear, misreporting of catches, and the use of non-impartial observers are the main areas of non-compliance.

The non-compliance can be attributed in part to the current declining level of detection that in turn contributes to a decreasing deterrent effect.

In other words, the fisheries department is not out on the water, is not monitoring these foreign fishing fleets and that is leading to the increased pressure in the catching of fish stocks that are under moratoria.

The briefing notes state further:

While there is 100% observer coverage on foreign fishing vessels, it has lost its deterrent effect, particularly on EU vessels because observer reports are not regarded as evidence of violations by the EU.

There is also inconsistent and inadequate follow-up to infringements of the NAFO measures by flag States.

Many see this as the result of an ineffective governance regime in the NAFO Regulatory Area.

The fisheries committee warned the government of these ongoing problems and encouraged the federal government to exert some control over these fishery problems on the east coast but to no avail.

What is also very interesting is that cuts are ongoing in the fisheries department of British Columbia. The briefing notes to the minister note that as a result of the core services review conducted by the provincial government, the minister of agriculture, food and fisheries resources have been “reduced by 45%”.

It goes on to say that MAFF is expected to seek greater support from DFO programs which will likely “create funding pressures for DFO”. Provincial cuts are simply being matched by federal cuts which further put the fishery stocks at risk.

I am not very encouraged by what I read in the budget because essentially no mention is made of the problems facing the fishing industry and the Canadian government's ability to fulfill its constitutional mandate, which is to protect these fishery stocks.

I am disturbed by that and I know that fishermen on both coasts will be very upset to learn of the minister's knowledge of the impact of these cuts and yet has failed to ensure that the government addressed these very real concerns.

   (1640)

 