



Opposition Leader Tom Mulcair writes that the PM must "back up the ceremony of a throne speech with substantive action". NDP photo

Speech From the Throne: Harper Can Run But He Can't Hide

Tom Mulcair

It is a ritual familiar to Canadians for its pageantry and tradition. But this throne speech may also be notable for its irony; delivered in the same Red Chamber that has generated both debate and scandal during Stephen Harper's tenure. For Opposition leader Tom Mulcair, abolishing the Senate is just the centrepiece of what should be, but likely won't be, in Stephen Harper's Speech from the Throne.

The Speech from the Throne is a most paradoxical event: an opportunity for renewal, steeped in tradition as old as Parliament itself.

The Usher of the Black Rod banging on the doors of the House of Commons; the slow procession past portraits of past prime ministers; the lavish confines of the upper chamber.

The pomp and ceremony seem almost as though they were designed to help Canadians forget what's come before. The opulent Senate chamber serving as the perfect media backdrop for a government looking to present a fresh,

new face to the voting public. We've watched this scene play out the same way, dozens of times. And yet, this time it will be different.

This fall, as Stephen Harper tries desperately to turn the page on the scandal and ethical lapses that have consumed his government, the plush surroundings of the Red Chamber will serve as a counter balance – an indelible reminder of the very missteps and controversies that have engulfed his party, his government and, indeed, his own office.

The Senate expense scandal has rattled

the Harper Conservatives. It has shaken their government to its core. And the Prime Minister is well aware that it will take more than a good show to distract Canadians from the onslaught of allegations facing his government.

If Harper is to have any hope of convincing Canadians that he's embarked on a new course, he'll have to back up the ceremony of a throne speech with substantive action. He'll have to address not only his government's ethical failings, but also the day-to-day priorities that hit Canadians closest to home.

We know that Harper is unlikely to suddenly embrace issues like climate change, early childhood education and prescription drug coverage – issues that have gone unaddressed by successive Liberal and Conservative governments alike. Yet, even within the limitations of what one can expect from a Conservative throne speech, there is still room for real action.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the economy has weighed most heavily on the minds of Canadians. We've faced a seemingly endless string of economic threats from abroad. The US financial crisis – and the global recession it brought about – have led to a steep decline in demand for Canadian exports. Our recovery has been marred by the uncertainty of debt spirals in Europe and political gridlock in the United States.

Even as those global economic storms subside, Canada now faces a new range of economic threats that spring from waters much closer to home. Today, record household debt is perhaps the most immediate threat to our national economy. Canadian families are caught between a rock and a hard place, struggling to keep up as the cost of living continues to rise. Youth unemployment has been in the double-digits for more than five years, robbing an entire generation of the experience and opportunities they need to build a career. And no longer is it a lack of demand that threatens Canadian energy exports, but rather an American public eschewing Canadian energy imports in response to the repeated failure of Canadian governments to address the impacts of climate change.

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Over the last five years, household debt has escalated to near crisis levels. By 2012, household debt stood at a record high of 167 per cent of disposable income. Mortgage debt alone now stands at over \$1 trillion. The Bank of Canada has declared fear of

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mounting household debt as the single greatest factor preventing it from doing more to stimulate our economy and create jobs. Perhaps most disturbing, Canadian household debt is now within hailing distance of American levels just prior to the crisis of 2008.

In the face of this record debt, Conservatives must do more than tighten mortgage rules and choke off credit. This fall's throne speech must attack the underlying causes driving our national indebtedness.

The Conservatives should propose new rules to rein in the most abusive practices of credit card companies and other lenders. They should ensure all Canadians with a clean credit record have access to at least one low limit, no frills credit card through their bank or financial institutions. Conservatives should respond to anti-competitive practices in the debit and credit card industries by limiting ATM fees. They should crack down on payday lenders that use deceptive practices and prey on less-informed borrowers to charge interest rates as high as 1,000 per cent.

In short, Conservatives should ensure at least basic protections for Canadian consumers and, in doing so, make life more affordable for Canadian families.

Of course, plans to address borrowing and consumer credit will only balance one side of the affordability ledger. Conservatives must also present a credible plan to create high-paying, quality jobs – jobs that come with decent benefits, a secure pension and enough of a salary for a family to live on. There are concrete actions that can be taken – if the Conservatives are willing to act.

While the current government has done its level best to promote an active image in pursuit of economic growth with "Action Plan" ads, its true tendencies have been more predictably conservative. Again, the throne speech presents an opportunity to change course.

A growing body of research confirms

the integral role that cities play as regional hubs of economic activity. It is our cities that bring together the cluster of skills, capital and infrastructure that allow our economy to flourish. As such, a vision for thriving cities should be at the centre of any strategy for jobs and growth. But to succeed, our cities need a federal government that understands the vital role they play in our economic future.

The first step in this government's new agenda for job creation should be to restore the \$6 billion it slashed from community infrastructure funding in the last federal budget.

Canada is among the most entrepreneurial countries in the world. Even through the worst of the recession, Canadian small businesses continued to thrive and multiply. Yet one of the most disturbing trends in Canadian business development is that alarmingly few of those small businesses are growing into medium-sized businesses and beyond.

From 2006 to 2010, Canada actually lost more than 1,500 medium-sized businesses – even as the number of small and large businesses grew. During that period, mid-sized businesses were 10 times as likely shrink or shut down as they were to grow.

New Democrats have proposed a job creation tax credit for small and medium-sized enterprises. The government should provide targeted tax incentives to businesses that create new jobs and new opportunities for economic growth – not across-the-board corporate tax cuts that benefit only the largest and most profitable companies.

With youth unemployment stubbornly high, it's vital that we specifically target youth job creation as well. Successive Liberal and Conservative governments have watched as a generation of middle-class jobs has disappeared, but they have done nothing to create the next generation of middle-class jobs. The TD bank recently found that young people graduating into the current job market face such poor job

prospects that entry level wages are down 4-5 per cent and are likely to take up to 17 years to fully recover.

Just as New Democrats have proposed a job creation tax credit for small and medium-sized businesses, we have proposed similar measures to tackle skyrocketing youth unemployment as well.

Conservatives, frankly, don't seem to understand the life of the modern young worker. This generation is faced not only with a historically tough job market – and the prospect of years spent working part-time, split shifts and contract jobs – but even once a permanent full-time job is found, it's less and less likely to come with benefits or a pension.

It was with this in mind that many of us took great heart at the finance minister's announcement last year that he would meet with his provincial counterparts this summer to draw up plans to increase benefits for the next generation of recipients under the Canada Pension Plan. Yet summer has come and gone with no meeting and no plan. If Stephen Harper is to regain the trust of young Canadians, he'll need to start by renewing that commitment and keeping his government's promise to strengthen the CPP.

Beyond economic matters, there are issues Conservatives could address that go to the very heart of what kind of country we want to be.

For decades, health, safety and environmental protections have been chipped away at in the name of economic progress. Both Liberal and Conservative governments have dismantled rules meant to protect the public and imposed industry self-regulation instead.

We have seen the legacy of these cuts in a listeriosis outbreak that killed 22 people. We've seen it in the largest beef recall in Canadian history. And we've seen it in pipeline spills that have grown all too common.

Today, experts from the Transportation Safety Board and Transport Canada are investigating the role that decades of deregulation played in the death of 47 people this summer in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec.

This attack on basic health, safety and environmental protections was sold to the voting public on the promise that

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it would pave our path to prosperity. In the greatest irony of all, it was exactly this sort of unfettered deregulation that led to the greatest global economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Here in Canada, the failure of both Liberal and Conservative governments to address the impact of climate change now threatens our economic relationship with the United States. So much so that the Obama administration is now under intense pressure to block projects like Keystone XL that would boost production from the Canadian oil sands. Rather than heed the warnings of scientists, economists and First Nations, Conservatives have instead pushed ahead with legislation to gut environmental assessments and eliminate protections for fish habitat and navigable waters.

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Where governments once took a leadership role in protecting the public interest, now they protect only private interests. In doing so, they have sacrificed our long-term prosperity for their short-sighted political gain. This has to end.

In the Speech from the Throne, the Prime Minister can signal that he intends to change course.

The Prime Minister can call for full and open hearings of the House of Commons Transport committee to investigate rail safety and the impacts of two decades of safety deregulation. The Prime Minister's party has thus far blocked such hearings.

The Prime Minister can announce

that his government will respond to calls from Alberta Premier Alison Redford for a Canadian energy strategy – a strategy that includes a plan for value-added jobs, energy security and tackling the threat posed by climate change.

The Prime Minister can recognize the legitimate grievances of First Nations that have given rise to movements such as Idle No More and agree to meaningful consultation aimed at restoring a rigorous federal system of environment assessments.

Of course, the Prime Minister can also take real action to show Canadians that he is committed to reversing the ethical slide of his eight year old Conservative government.

As it stands now, for the past eight years Stephen Harper stood by the Senate he's pledged reform. After these eight long years, I believe most Canadians would agree that the state of affairs in the Senate is worse now than ever.

Harper is clinging to an old Conservative dream. He wants to radically change the way our system works. He wants to bring US-style gridlock into Canadian politics – two elected Houses blocking each other's every move. But, the truth is, for all the noise made by those desperately trying to defend the Red Chamber, the fact is that abolition is in many ways the conservative option for Senate reform.

This country is a democracy. It has been for nearly 150 years. Except on those rare occasions when unelected senators have the audacity to interfere, it is our democratically elected leaders who write our laws. It is, in practice, the House of Commons that governs our affairs.

If Stephen Harper is truly committed to changing course – and changing the culture of entitlement in Ottawa – he should make it official and read the Red Chamber its last rites. **P**

Tom Mulcair, leader of the New Democratic Party, is Leader of the Official Opposition.