

The Hon. Joe Volpe, P.C., M.P.
Speech on C-50, Budget Implementation Bill
Third Reading
June 2, 2008

Mr. Speaker, I, too, have been listening to the debate on the budget because I thought that was what we were discussing.

The budget is an opportunity for the government of the day to lay out a vision, to lay out a plan, to lay out a strategy for how it will expend the nation's resources; that is, the taxes that it collects, what it will give back to Canadians for the money that it takes out of their hard-earned paycheques and equally important, how it will deal with the economic stresses of the day, and the natural resources that are at the disposal of people in every province in order to meet the demands of everyday life.

That is what a budget is supposed to do. That is what a budget is designed to do in a democratic environment, so that a government can be accountable. It lays out a plan, it lays out a vision, and it takes responsibility for both vacuums; that is, what is not done and what is done insufficiently.

In this budget document, Mr. Speaker, I ask you to think carefully upon the following for a moment.

First, it has shown that the government is capable of spending money at a rate that no other government that has preceded it has been able to demonstrate. In fact, public expenditures have gone up by 14%. An increase of 14%, we would probably say, is money well spent, whether it is done through tax cuts or outright emissions of dollars, this is good for the country.

All of my constituents, like the ones from British Columbia, are asking: What do we have to show for that 14% increase? If we spent 14% more on a car we purchased, we would be able to tell the difference. If we bought 14% more groceries, we would be able to tell the difference. If we spent 14% more on our clothing, we would be able to tell the difference. What has been accomplished with that 14% expenditure increase? Perhaps the government members would like to tell us what impact that 14% increase has had on an auto sector in Ontario, primarily, but throughout Canada, that is completely collapsing.

Today, for example, General Motors announced that in Oshawa it will cut another 1,000 jobs. I am not a member from Oshawa. I used to be responsible for the GTA. I might, without undue humility, say I prevailed upon cabinet to do some things for the province, for the manufacturing sector, and for the auto industry, in particular, because so many jobs depend on the auto industry.

Mr. Speaker, were you aware that there are approximately 385,000 jobs that are directly or indirectly associated with auto assembly, the auto part industry and after market delivery? That is 385,000.

When we take a look at that number, we get a sense of how much of an impact that number has on Canadians everywhere. That is 385,000 families. Even if we were to take the average number of people per family and do the appropriate multiplication, we would see that it is a population that is in excess of the population of the province of New Brunswick. It is greater than the population of the province of Nova Scotia. It is almost greater than the population of Manitoba as well as that of Saskatchewan.

We are not talking about incidental job losses. We are talking about the infrastructure of a people and the infrastructure of a province on which the people depend for sustenance, for wealth creation, and indeed, for the maintenance of the Canadian federation.

I do not see anything in the budget on that. It shocks me that the Minister of Finance, who is from the centre of that manufacturing industry, the auto sector, would have not a mere consideration for what would be involved.

He sees, for example, as the government must see, that the price of fuel, gasoline at the pumps, has gone to \$1.30, in some cases more, and there is nothing there. Yet, we know that the government, when it was in opposition, was complaining intensely when the price of a litre of gasoline was at 80¢ and 85¢.

What does the government do now? What does it do to alleviate the increased costs of energy and the means of production, both of goods that are edible and goods that are consumable differently? What is in the budget that tells us that the government is seized of the crisis and is prepared to do something about it? Is the answer “nothing”?

I see government members in the House willing to support the initiatives of their Minister of Finance, but where is the action? There is none.

In fact, let us take a look at the transportation modes that are at the heart of the way that the manufacturing sector must operate, not only in Canada but, and let me be parochial for a moment and think about my province of Ontario, the north-south trade. In particular, the trade that we have with the United States depends so much on the access routes, specifically in Windsor and Fort Erie, but also in Sarnia, up in Sault Ste. Marie, and up north in Thunder Bay, and I dare say even as we get closer to Brockville and Kingston. However, none of those access routes were mentioned in this budget. There are no funds for a transportation system that would facilitate the flow of goods to our biggest market, our partner that consumes approximately \$1 billion of our exports every day of the year.

Where are the funds for ensuring that CBSA, the Canada Border Services Agency, builds its efficiencies at these border points, so that goods can move across freely and quickly in a just-in-time environment, a just-in-time environment in a manufacturing sector that is collapsing as we speak today.

These are not inventions. General Motors and the CAW issued press releases today, probably at a press conference while we were here in the House, to reinforce it. The economy is collapsing because of these issues. Where is the government on this budget? It is absent.

However, I have to compliment at least one member in this House because the total amount of money that this budget apparently, although we do not see it definitively, talks about, in terms of transportation flow from the federal government to any province, specifically Ontario, has to do with a potential train between Peterborough and Toronto. Forty per cent of all of the moneys put in a transportation transit fund, \$200 million, is for that one singular project.

If it is a city or a greater metropolitan area like the GTA, it is out of luck. Peterborough is not yet part of the GTA, although I imagine that some of the transportation funds and the construction associated with its expenditure might eventually build out in that direction.

I do not want to be too facetious, but the construction industry is collapsing. Where is the government on an issue where we are talking about the collapse of the construction industry? And it is collapsing for the usual factors that we would think of. There is a financial meltdown in the United States and its effects are being felt here in Canada, number one.

Number two, we have been talking about the lumber industry, its impact, the prices associated with it here in Canada, the production associated with it, or lack thereof, and the closing down of communities.

Where is this budget on these matters? It is a financial statement, a financial expression of the government's willingness to lay out a strategy for the entire federation, and the answer is nowhere. There is no strategy. There is no plan. There is no vision.

I take a look at where we have been going in the debate so far. People have started to refer to Bill C-50 as "the immigration bill". Can members imagine that? We are talking about a budget.

One page has defined this budget, the importance of which has been magnified by the Minister of Finance who has said that it is of crucial importance to this country that we eliminate the backlog in the number of applications of those who would make Canada their home. That is the big crisis. The big demand for a vision statement that the government opposite is responding to.

Let us take a look at some of the figures. Government members and opposition members have now begun to accept the fact that there were 700,000 applications in the backlog when the Conservatives formed government. According to Conservative figures, that represented an increase in the backlog by 54,000 per year during the Liberal administration.

According to government advertisements, the 700,000 backlog in applications has jumped to 925,000. In two short years the government has managed to increase the backlog in applications by 225,000. The government has not told us how many people have actually applied but it picked this number of 925,000. The government is not going to do anything to solve the problem. In one page out of a 139 page budget document there is one little clause that says none of this applies to anybody who was already in the queue as of February 28, 2008. Imagine.

Canadians following this debate are thinking the government does not have a strategy for meeting this crisis of the day, but when it fabricates one, it does not have a plan to resolve it. The government is simply going to pretend the problem has disappeared because as of February 28 those 925,000 applications are still going to be there and the government is not going to do anything about it. The government's position is not to do anything. It is the same as the economic position on the crisis of the day.

Does the government treat immigration as an economic issue? Let us look at it for a moment. To meet the economic requirements of today, the government says people must be brought in who would satisfy the demands of a growing Canadian population. That is fine, but consider this. Between 2001 and 2006, the five year period immediately preceding the arrival of the Conservatives to government, what happened? According to the government, immigration policies were wrong. Yet, over a five year period the immigration program produced 350,000 new immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64, people at their most productive. These individuals had a university degree or better. How much money does that represent in terms of investment?

If the budget were directed to 350,000 people in Canada with a university degree or better; that is, they were prepared to meet the demands of a changing economy, a knowledge-based economy, an economy of the future, how much would that cost us? The cost would start at \$50 billion and climb, but we could not produce that kind of talent pool in five years because we would have to do it over a 22 year period.

Let me use our young men and women pages here in the House as an example. It takes about 22 years from the time they enter school until they graduate. A knowledge-based economy, a competitive economy, in the 21st century cannot wait 22 years to produce 350,000 people with a university degree or better.

Our immigration system, over the previous five years preceding the Conservatives coming to power, produced that many people. In addition to that, it produced an additional 70,000 people who had a college diploma or equivalent; that is applicable skills in the post-secondary environment. That is not bad. That cost a little less. Those immigration policies also produced an additional 30,000 people who had some form of training that went beyond high school. In other words, they had a skill set that could be applied in a hands on environment.

I know you have been following those numbers, Mr. Speaker. Of the men and women who entered our country between the ages of 25 and 64, 67% had better than post-secondary school education or training. Canadians probably are wondering what the comparative numbers are for born in Canada applicants to the job market. While 51% of immigrants had a university degree or better, only 23% of those born in Canada had a similar qualification. We go abroad for our talent.

Think about the kind of talent we need. Today provincial premiers are telling us we need more than university educated people. We need more than college educated people. Yes, we need people who have skills on the job. We need more of them, and we need more of those who have post-graduate degrees.

Canadians should think about this, that 49% of all Ph.D. degree-holders come through our immigration system. How many have a master's degree? The answer is 40%.

I know my colleagues opposite are saying where is this going? It is going precisely to this location. If Bill C-50, through the immigration changes, is designed to give us greater skilled immigrants, how much does the government expect to improve on those figures? How many more does the government expect to bring in who meet those qualifications? In fact, does the government want people with those kinds of qualifications?

Those numbers are available to the government. Statistics Canada reported them. I did not invent those numbers. Statistics Canada is giving the government those answers. Statistics Canada and Human Resources Canada is telling the government what we have as a basis for building a society and an economy and budgets therefore that will respond to that economy. Here is what we can do. Here is what we ought to do.

What is the government's response? On the economy, it is nothing. On immigration, it is less than that. Let us do away, is the government's response, with all those measures that succeeded in bringing to us, for us, for the development of a Canadian society for the 21st century the kinds of men and women who provide us not only with the skill sets we need today, but for the leadership that we must have tomorrow.

Are we up for it? We are. Are we prepared to go forward with the kind of change that will bring a new dynamic to our country? We are. Are we prepared to take those risks that say that immigration is as much a part of the economic policy of the nation as any other fiscal plan? We are.

Why is the government silent on its most fundamental defining document of both where we are going in the future and how we are resolving the problems of today?