

In search of a different future: the Alternative Federal Budget

BY JIM DELANEY

The federal budget was released on Tuesday to rounds of applause from the Liberal-dominated House of Commons. As Paul Martin proclaimed that "the new confidence in the economy did not come about by accident," politicians supported him in what seemed to be the most positive fiscal year that Canada has seen in some time.

This optimism, however, did not leak far beyond Parliament Hill. Nowhere was this cynicism more prevalent than in Hancock Hall, home of the Maritime School of Social Work. While Martin's colleagues applauded his announcements, most were met with jeers and snickers by the difficult crowd in Hancock.

This gathering, of course, may have been a tougher crowd than Paul Martin is used to facing. Social activists from fields ranging from the environment to child care to labour gathered for the third annual Budget Watch. They spoke to the new budgetary meas-

ures and promoted the Centre for Policy Alternatives' Alternative Federal Budget.

The anger expressed at the meeting was due to a seeming lack of attention in the Liberal budget to social concerns, and a complete disregard for the alternatives that have been proposed in the past.

"It was predictable, but disappointing," said Jessica Squires of the Canadian Federation of Students.

While the few small social concessions of the budget were welcomed, most claimed that the budget was far from satisfactory, eliciting anger from some social activists.

"I was so mad, I almost threw something at the screen!" one man exclaimed.

However cynical the responses to Mr. Martin's television speech were, the group was present to do more than complain about the lack of vision presented by the government. Participants also came to speak of other options, in particular the Alternative Fed-

eral Budget.

The Alternative Federal Budget is the result of a coalition of social groups and research organizations that are concerned with the federal government's new fiscal directions. Compiled by the Centre for Policy Alternatives and Choices, a coalition for social justice, the alternative budget claims to be able to get the government's fiscal house in order while improving social programs and creating jobs at the same time.

The document opens the discussion by claiming that, "To budget is to choose between different economic and social policies. Budgets, therefore, are about basic values and political priorities. The priorities and values of the federal Liberal government are distorted."

The alternative budget attempts to take aim at the financial deficit through government investment in economic growth:

"The current government hopes that if it pulls out of social spending, and creates a favourable market for business, the private

sector will begin to take over," said Paulette Sadaway, of the Canadian Labour Congress, a large contributor to the document.

This assumption, she continues, is backward.

"What we should be doing is investing in social capital in order to create economic growth."

The Alternative Budget would invest in this social capital through job creation and infrastructure projects which address both social and physical infrastructure. Targeting many non-traditional projects that work for the environment and disadvantaged groups, it proposes to invigorate the economy through employment that is relevant, and make a direct impact on Canada's physical, economic, and social infrastructure.

The Alternative Budget claims that Canada needs a total of \$1 billion invested in jobs, and cannot achieve this figure without direct government intervention. It asserts that direct action would shrink the unemployment rate to 8.6% in 1997 to 7% the following year, and to 5% by the year 2001.

Sean Kelly, editor of the Sustainable Times, welcomes the suggestions of the Alternative Budget. Speaking at the Budget Watch on Tuesday night, he said that the federal government must start focussing on Green Jobs. He applauded the alternative budget's focus on energy efficiency, through retrofitting inefficient buildings, as one program where the alternative obviously surpasses the official budget.

When questioned about fiscal responsibility, the authors of the Alternative Budget balk at the assumption that they are merely spendthrift socialists.

"We are very committed to reducing the deficit," said Sadaway.

Indeed, if the Alternative Budget's figures hold true, it would reduce the deficit faster than the Liberal Government's budget through creating economic growth to offset social spending. Of the \$25.9 billion that would be required to finance

the new programmes, 70% would flow automatically from growth in the economy.

Fair taxation is one area that is of particular concern. One activist made it clear that "when Minister Martin said that there were no new taxes, there were also no loopholes being closed."

Furthermore, there were no new business taxes, no new taxes on large inheritances, and no taxes on financial transactions. The Alternative Budget proposes to change this, and to reorient the taxation system in order to force those who can pay their share to do so. New tax measures will raise \$10 billion by the year 1999, all without levying taxes on those who cannot afford to pay. Those at the lower end of the totem pole would benefit from Child Tax benefits and the elimination of the surtax on low incomes.

Investment in social programs would be offset by a more rapidly growing economy. As Canadians go back to work, there would be more money to spread around.

The complete divergence of the Alternative Budget from the official budget may provide some cause for concern. Whether or not the suggested policies are adopted wholesale by the federal government (as they will most certainly not be) the writers of the Alternative Budget do show that there are other options. They have gathered empirical proof that the budgeting decisions of our current government are not an absolute necessity, but a choice — a choice that we could all do without.

The value of these choices was made most clear by Lynne Jones, of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

"I am really optimistic about this budget," she said. "I am really optimistic and enthused that people are seeing through this stuff."

Those that were gathered into Hancock Hall, watching the budget on two oversized televisions, did see through it. They stared into Mr. Martin's eyes and realized that — while the television was clapping — the whole world wasn't clapping with it.

Entrepreneurs are Open For Business

BY CHRIS BENJAMIN

If you're looking to open your own business, it's as simple as getting off the steps of the Spring Garden Road Library and walking across the street.

Open For Business was launched by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and the Nova Scotia Department of Education in August 1995. Located at 1521 Grafton Street, Open For Business is a walk-in centre for young entrepreneurs. It is a service intended to assist those aspiring to start a business, those with a business already in full swing, and those anywhere in between. The program is a subsidiary of the Centre for Entrepreneurship Education and Development, part of the government's recent focus on creating jobs by incorporating new business projects into the education of youth.

Derek Power of Pacific Rim Imports/Exports said, "It's a great spot to get good business advice and encouragement in language which I understand."

Upon entering Open For Business, I was struck by the bright multicolored walls, decorated with entrepreneurial posters and articles. The friendly staff, wearing Open For Business T-shirts, greeted me with smiles and a "How can I help you?"

Staff member Tony Faddoul

explained that the trained consultants and co-op students provide numerous services, like conferences on the how-tos of starting a business. Topics discussed include: information on computers, internet access, entrepreneurial books and magazines, and financial resources. Successful entrepreneurs lecture using "seeing by doing" methods of instruction. The cost of attendance at any one of these conferences is three dollars per person.

Local entrepreneur Dijon Curley, owner of Dijon's Delectables, commented, "The staff are great. They thought and acted like entrepreneurs. They have a lot of great resources, and got me a spot on The Leading Edge (an MITV program which profiles local entrepreneurs)."

Corporate executives such as Chuck Coolen of Corporate Communications Limited (Atlantic Canada's largest marketing communications company), and entrepreneurs like Liz Crocker, co-owner of P'Lovers and Woozles, have donated valuable time and energy to this program. Also, Open For Business has received \$1.63 million from various levels of government and the private sector.

Open For Business is primarily targeted at people between the ages of 14 and 30 and nobody gets turned away. Twenty to seventy people pass through the centre each day, all sharing a desire to work for themselves, and to succeed.

It is this entrepreneurial spirit that inspired Chris Curtis, a provincial entrepreneurship consultant, to start and manage the program. Mr. Curtis is also the founder of the Junior Achievers program, which gives high school students a chance to receive valuable experience starting their own businesses.

An individual who uses Open For Business has access to valuable resources and educational conferences, as well as one-on-one counselling with employees. Of equal importance is the network created by the program. Every entrepreneur who uses Open For Business's services is added to a database, which now holds over 1,500 names. Those who already have businesses can attend roundtable sessions with other business people and discuss ideas and problems confidentially. Those who work from their homes can use the centre as a meeting place with clients.

If you wish to start a business, have a business idea or opportunity, have a business plan, or already own a business, Open For Business may be able to help you. They are open weekdays from 9 a.m. until 8 p.m., and Saturdays from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. Open For Business can be reached at 424-3707 or you visit their website at www.ceed.ednet.ns.ca.

Dates to Remember

February 24-28

- Reading Week — no classes.

March 3

- Classes resume.

March 17

- Last day to withdraw from B and R classes.

March 28

- Good Friday — school closed.

April 11

- Classes end.

April 16

- Exams begin.

April 30

- Exams end.