

The Liberals are in power. They have tabled two budgets but the GST is still here — and this place is much quieter — not to mention free trade, this idea which had our friends up in arms before the last election and which they are now embracing with an almost obscene passion.

Let us not disturb this honeymoon right away!

[English]

Hon. Michael Kirby: Honourable senators, I rise today to say a few words about the government's budget, which was tabled in the other place less than a month ago. In doing so, I will also pick up on some of the comments made by Senator Roberge in his speech.

Honourable senators, the 1995 federal budget takes direct action to reduce government spending and refocus government activities on key priorities and needs. The goal of this strategy is clear. The goal is what it had to be in the current economic climate, which is to restore fiscal health to the Government of Canada and, equally important, honourable senators, to reshape the role of government itself in order to build a stronger and more dynamic Canadian economy.

This is a budget, honourable senators, about getting government right so that government, in turn, can do a better job of helping to get the economy right.

This budget reflects the critical role of government to sustain economic growth and confidence and, as promised in the last election campaign, to create new jobs.

• (1440)

A number of media comments on the February 27 budget have accused the Liberal government of stealing a page from the Reform Party. Some commentators have even made the outlandish statement that this budget adopted the policies of the previous Conservative government. While this budget does, in fact, do many of the things which the Conservatives had said they would do, as opposed to the things they did, it also reflects a truly Liberal set of philosophical positions. This budget has developed a plan which adapts government in the 1990s to the problems of the 1990s, while simultaneously preserving its ability to help those in need.

It is important to understand that, contrary to the approaches of other parties, including that of the previous government which approached budget cutting with the very simplistic view that it was best to cut all departments and programs equally across the board, this budget has sought to make specific cuts to specific areas. At the same time, because of its approach to reducing the size of government and the size of the public service, this budget seeks to change the very structure of how government operates, refocusing government on meeting the needs of the people it was elected to serve.

Through this budget, and through the program review exercise which the government has been undertaking, every department of the government has been asked to spell out clearly what its goals and mandates are, and what they should be, in order to refocus the entire method of operation of the government.

In the broad public policy debates that are taking place in every industrialized country at this time in history, the fundamental issues are what the role of government should be in the 1990s, and what the role of government will be as we enter the next century. The answer to this question must, of necessity, include the answer to the question of what are the responsibilities of other parts of society. I do not mean only governments. What are the responsibilities of the private sector, volunteer organizations and individual citizens as we look at reshaping the way society governs itself?

This budget reflects the principle that the fundamental role of government in the late 1990s and into the next century should be to set the broad policy framework within which other parts of society operate. This government believes in that approach and, in so doing, is seeking to reduce the role of the federal government with respect to specific programs and specific service delivery issues.

The budget seeks to make people more efficient and more self-sufficient, and to reduce the role of government in terms of detailed program delivery issues. It reflects the need for government in the 1990s to be streamlined, simplified and modernized in the way it runs its business.

Equally important, honourable senators, the program review in this budget clearly reflects the need for government to substantially reduce the amount of money it spends on providing goods and services to itself, as opposed to providing services to individual Canadians.

This budget also seeks, as Senator Roberge commented in his speech, to substantially reduce the overlap and duplication between the federal and provincial levels of government.

However, this budget still recognizes, as the government recognizes in a number of other policy areas, that there is a vital role for government in the 1990s in terms of setting national standards with respect to the services that Canadians receive. The key in setting standards is to recognize that the detailed way in which programs and services are delivered to Canadians need not be the same in every community across Canada. In fact, substantially greater flexibility is needed at the local level.

This is not a new phenomena. For a very long time, national programs in this country have been designed much more for the ease of administrators than for the purpose of helping the individuals whom the program is designed to help. This has to end.

This budget and the program review recognize that government must become much more flexible than it has historically been with regard to the methods by which programs and services are delivered. Those delivery mechanisms must reflect local conditions much more than they have until now. One of the principles underlying the program review and the budget is the recognition that it is important that government programs and services value people and community needs ahead of rules, that flexibility is more important than rigid adherence to a particular administrative structure. It is this flexibility which, in the future, will be regarded as one of the hallmarks of this government's approach to government in the 1990s.