

Feds pledge 6-point action plan in throne speech



Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean delivers the speech from the throne in the Senate chamber on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Monday, Jan. 26, 2009. (Tom Hanson / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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The Conservative government is promising a six-point economic plan to stimulate the ailing economy, Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean outlined in the speech from the throne on Monday.

Harper's Conservative government said it must act swiftly and deeply to stave off economic disaster -- in sharp contrast to its message just a few weeks earlier that Canada would escape recession and post a budget surplus.

The plan calls for injecting stimulus into the economy through public and private investment -- including immediate cash for infrastructure

"In these uncertain times, when the world is threatened by a struggling economy, it is imperative that we work together, that we stand beside one another and that we strive for greater solidarity," Jean said in a bleak statement that made references to the Great Depression.

The speech from the throne opens the 40th parliament and sets out the government's blueprint for the upcoming parliamentary session. The speech, which Jean delivered at 2 p.m. ET, comes just a day before the government unveils its long-awaited budget.

Details of the speech included promises to:

- stimulate the economy through direct government action and by encouraging private expenditure
- invest in infrastructure
- protect stability of financial systems
- give access to credit for consumers and businesses
- support industries that Canadians rely on: forestry, manufacturing, automotive, tourism, agriculture

"Our government is acting to protect the vulnerable: the unemployed, lower-income Canadians, seniors, Aboriginal Canadians and others hit hardest by the global economic recession," said Jean, in words that seemed to be aimed at appeasing the opposition Liberals.

However, the speech made little reference to permanent Tory tax cuts for middle-class Canadians, which the Grits say would throw the country into a spiral of deficit spending.

The Liberals have also warned the Conservatives that they are prepared to vote against the budget if it doesn't serve the best interests of the country.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff has repeated in past weeks that his party's support for the budget is contingent on whether it takes swift action on the economy, and that it protects Canada's most vulnerable.

Ignatieff: Will their actions match their words?

Following the throne speech, Ignatieff told reporters he will not make a snap decision after Tuesday's budget is revealed. He said he will consult with his caucus after the budget is delivered and won't announce a decision until Wednesday morning.

Ignatieff noted an "extraordinary contrast" in the language of this throne speech compared with one the government delivered several months back.

While he called the autumn statement "partisan and divisive," he said Monday's speech talked about "reaching across the divide and finding non-partisan solutions -- and some particularly charming words about protecting the vulnerable, saving jobs today and creating jobs tomorrow."

"Where have I heard that language before?" said the Liberal leader, in an apparent jab at the Tories taking a page from the Liberals. "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

Ignatieff added, however, that there is a "problem of trust" when it comes to Harper's Conservatives.

"This government appears to have a split personality. One time it uses one language, the other time it uses another. And our difficulty as the official opposition is figuring out who to believe, which government to believe, which language to believe and we'll have to find out when the proof of the pudding is



Prime Minister Stephen Harper looks on as Governor General Michaëlle Jean reads the Speech from the Throne in the Senate Chamber on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, on Monday Jan. 26, 2009. (Fred Chartrand / THE CANADIAN PRESS)



Prime Minister Stephen Harper speaks with Governor General Michaëlle Jean as she waits to deliver the Speech from the Throne on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, on Monday, Jan. 26, 2009. (Tom Hanson / THE CANADIAN PRESS)



Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff reacts to the

speech from the throne in the foyer of the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Monday, Jan. 26, 2009. (Sean Kilpatrick / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

delivered tomorrow in the budget."

Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe on Monday echoed Ignatieff, saying he will wait to see the budget before deciding whether to support it. He has stated in past weeks, however, that he doubts the fiscal document will meet the needs of Quebec.

NDP Leader Jack Layton said that his party will vote against the budget because Harper is untrustworthy and will soon ditch the softer tone for a "my way or the highway" approach.

Difficult years ahead

The government warns that Canadians will face a difficult year -- "perhaps several difficult years." But it promises to spend what is necessary to stimulate the economy and to invest what is necessary to protect Canada's future prosperity.

The throne speech was just four pages long -- a mere one-fifth of the length of the government's November throne speech -- and focused almost exclusively on the economy. But it does add that the government will also attend to "other important priorities that it set out" in its earlier throne speech, including:

- Senate reform
- scaling back on government spending
- criminal justice and environmental policy

The speech followed a week-long series of budget details that the government has been strategically leaking over the past week.

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty will deliver the budget on Tuesday at 4 p.m. ET. The Tories need the Liberals to support the budget in order to survive.

Earlier Monday, Transport Minister John Baird announced the budget will include \$7 billion for infrastructure projects -- with an emphasis on getting "shovels in the ground as soon as possible.

The Conservative government is also dedicating \$1 billion for a green infrastructure fund, and \$2 billion for construction and repairs at colleges and universities across the country.

Errol Mendes, a policy expert at University of Ottawa, said Monday's throne speech marks a sharp shift for the Conservatives and is an attempt to be conciliatory after last year's political wrangling.

"I think what we heard today was basically the Harper government trying to recover from its near death experience that it went through last November and December," he told CTV Newsnet Monday afternoon.

"I think what they're trying to do is set the table for at least the Liberal party to say, 'we can hold our nose and pass (the budget).'"

However, Mendes pointed out that the permanent tax cuts were left out of the speech, so it's hard to tell if the Tories are really prepared to work with the other parties.

Mendes said that the proposed tax cuts have raised the ire of the Liberals, who believe that any permanent rollback could put the country's finances into "structural deficit."