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Opposition united against Tories' 'mean-spirited' cuts: 'Ottawa is swimming in money,' Liberal MP says, noting \$13.2-billion budget surplus

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Byline: Norma Greenaway

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OTTAWA -- Opposition MPs ganged up on the Conservative government Tuesday over a new slew of spending cuts worth \$1 billion, charging it had heartlessly targeted the most vulnerable in society with its "trimming-the-fat" exercise.

"Never have Canadians seen such mean-spirited cuts when Ottawa is swimming in money," Liberal MP John McCallum declared in the middle of a raucous question period dominated by verbal sparring over the spending cuts at a time when the government admits it is running a \$13.2-billion budget surplus.

In a rare show of unity, Liberal, NDP and Bloc MPs rose in the Commons and denounced the ruling Conservatives as being everything from arrogant to vindictive. McCallum said the cuts were clearly designed to shore up the government's conservative base.

NDP leader Jack Layton accused the government of being on an ideological binge that wrongly treats ordinary Canadians who may benefit from programs as "merely fat to be trimmed."

Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe said the government was depriving Canadians of an important tool to protect such things as gay and lesbian rights by killing a program that helped finance challenges to federal law. The program is one Conservatives have loved to hate.

The Harper government announced Monday it would reduce spending by \$1 billion over the next two years by cutting administrative costs, as well as many programs aimed at helping such people as jobless youth, illiterate adults, first nations, women and members of special-interest groups challenging federal laws on equality grounds.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his senior ministers were unapologetic. They defended their choice in cuts as in the best interests of Canadian taxpayers by, for example, saving \$55 million by ending a summer employment program for youth that provided subsidies to employers. They also touted their move to put the unexpectedly large budget surplus towards paying down more of the debt.

"We will pay about \$650 million less in interest this year as a result of the reduction in the debt," Finance Minister Jim Flaherty said, brushing aside NDP complaints he had not consulted Canadians about how the near record surplus should be spent.

Harper pooh-poohed the "sound and fury" from the opposition benches, and pointedly noted that unlike the Liberals in the mid-1990s, the government "did not slash \$25 billion from health care."

Away from the Commons, the impact of the wide-ranging cuts was still being weighed by groups that might be affected.

Literacy advocates said the government is sending a worrisome signal by cutting \$17.7 million that had been earmarked for literacy and learning skills at a time when the country is facing a looming labour shortage.

"This is a black day for us," said Wendy Desbrisay, executive director of the Canadian Literacy Movement. "We did not see this coming."

Studies have said as many as nine million Canadians between the age of 16 and 25 do not have the literacy skills needed for today's workforce.

Canadian Policy Research Networks was cut by \$3 million, representing 70 per cent of its annual budget. Spokeswoman Jennifer Fry said the research institute was taken by surprise because the Conservative government had signed a deal earlier this year to provide four years of funding at \$3 million a year.

The group has conducted a wide range of research on such issues as the quality of post-secondary education, skills shortages and retraining since it was founded more than a decade ago by Judith Maxwell, a former chairwoman of the Economic Council of Canada.

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