

Budget focuses on building a sustainable and inclusive post-pandemic future

By Nate Smelle

On April 19, the federal government released its first budget since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Arriving at a monumental time in human history, Budget 2021: A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience promises to help Canadians through this period of uncertainty created by the still unfolding global health crisis.

Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development, Maryam Monsef applauds the budget, describing it as a 'historic' and vital step forward on the country's road to recovery. Throughout the 725-page document, the federal government outlines its plan to lead Canadians through and beyond the perils of the pandemic. As part of the Liberal team that created the budget, Monsef says she is excited to see the beneficial impact it will have on Canadians during this difficult time. She says the number one objective of this budget is to help Canadians get back to work.

'We are going to create the conditions for one million jobs to be created by the end of this year,' says Monsef.

'We are going to do that first and foremost by conquering COVID-19. There's funds in this budget to continue to support businesses and individuals through this difficult time. For example, the rent support and wage subsidy will continue until Sept. 25, and I hope that provides some relief for entrepreneurs in our community.'

The extension of COVID-19 benefits is just one way the budget will immediately provide relief for Canadians, Monsef says. Another reason she considers the 2021 federal budget to be a historic piece of legislation is because it was presented by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Chrystia Freeland, the first woman to deliver the nation's key annual economic address. In recognition of the fact that many women have had to put their careers on hold and leave the workforce to look after their children during the pandemic, Monsef says the government has allocated \$30-billion over the next five years to establish a national early learning and childcare program that is affordable for everyone. In the budget, she says the government has also committed \$8.3-billion each year after that to ensure the success of the program.

'The universal early learning and childcare investment is going to mean that parents with young ones who pay really high fees right now for childcare are going to pay half that amount by next year,' explains Monsef.

'That was a very clear commitment in the budget. In five years from now, every child in this country will benefit from an average \$10 a day fee for quality, inclusive, accessible care, and also early learning. That's really big because we have seen tens of thousands of women who were pulled out of the work force because of COVID-19. If we are not smart and strategic - listening to them, asking them what it is that they need, providing them with this childcare that they've asked for - then we are going to lose their talents and their contributions to the workforce. They are going to have to give up on their dreams and have fewer choices. But, most importantly for a lot of employers out there the labour shortages are going to go up, so the childcare piece is critical.'

Monsef says yet another reason to get excited about the 2021 budget is because it focuses directly on the people and sectors that have been hardest hit by COVID-19. For example, she says in the budget the government targets the needs of the tourism sector, women, young people, seniors, small and medium sized businesses, and racialized and low income earning Canadians. According to Monsef what makes this budget unique is that it was intentionally created using what she calls a 'rural lens.' To address the needs of rural Canadians, she says the government is investing approximately \$1-billion for tourism and to support Community Futures' rural economic development efforts.

'What you will also see in this budget is that the word 'rural' is mentioned more in this budget than in any other budget,' Monsef says.

'It was mentioned more than 80 times and that was deliberate. We have both woven a rural lens into our COVID-19 response, and

into our budget. What that means is that Ottawa is working deliberately to use data that we are now collecting- which the previous government had stopped - to better understand how rural and smaller communities are being affected by COVID-19, what measures and interventions are working, what we need to improve on, and, understanding those differences between rural suburban and urban has helped us tailor or response to COVID-19; and in this budget, to recover from COVID-19 very carefully, and based on evidence.?

The 2021 budget also brings with it a \$1-billion investment in broadband that will help improve access to high-speed internet for people living in poorly serviced areas such as North Hastings. Monsef says the investment is a 'top up' to the universal broadband fund which the federal government announced last November. Noting how Hastings-Lennox and Addington's former Member of Parliament Mike Bossio was instrumental in the development of this program, she says the top up funding will ensure that more Canadians have access to high-speed internet at home. Explaining how this program is tailored to help people in rural and northern communities, Monsef says they created a concierge service for small communities who don't necessarily have access to the grant writers that larger communities do. She says this service provides municipalities with the opportunity to speak with an engineer acting on behalf of the federal government, who will help guide them through the application process.

'We separated it into two streams of funding for high-speed internet,' explains Monsef.

'One: for projects that could be completed by the end of this year - so shovels would go in the ground now, for this construction season, and people would have 50/10 or higher access by the end of this year. Then we created another stream for projects that would take longer - infrastructure projects that take, two, three, four years. The program and the concierge service that we set up is working so well, and we got a big response from communities. So, a \$1-billion top up, in addition to what we already had working with us, means that we can focus more on projects that can get more Canadians connected to high-speed internet faster.'

Acknowledging that the climate crisis is not going away, the government has promised \$17.6-billion in Budget 2021: A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience to foster an ecologically conscious "green" recovery. These funds will be used to: fight climate change and exceed its Paris climate targets; reduce Green House Gas emissions by 36 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030; help more than 200,000 Canadians make their homes greener; build a net-zero economy by investing in world-leading technologies that make industry cleaner; and, protect 25 per cent of Canada's lands and oceans by 2025, while creating "good middle-class jobs in the green economy."

Responding to the "long-standing inequities" in the Canadian economy that have been exposed by the pandemic, the 2021 federal budget aims to "break down barriers to full economic participation for all Canadians." Other key components of the government's plan for a "sustainable" economic recovery and growth include: establishing a \$15 federal minimum wage; supporting more than 35,000 affordable homes, especially for the most vulnerable Canadians; taking action to end gender-based violence; ensuring Canada has one of the largest support packages for youth in the world; supporting entrepreneurs from diverse groups; addressing systemic racism in Canadian society; lifting over 100,000 people out of poverty; and, making a historic investment in Indigenous peoples and reconciliation.

Recognizing how difficult and devastating the pandemic has been for everyone, Monsef is eager to get the recovery underway. Although hopeful for the future, moving forward she says it is important to remember that "COVID-19 has taught us some hard-learned lessons on what to improve upon."

Expressing what fuels her hopefulness for a future beyond COVID-19, Monsef says "Vaccines are rolling out and people are getting those shots in their arms. Some 90 per cent of people 80 years of age and older have been vaccinated at least once. Come June, everybody will get their first dose. Come September everyone will be fully vaccinated and we will get to pick up where we left off, while learning what COVID-19 has taught us. I think the future for Canada is bright, and our communities play a really big role in our future prosperity. The recovery from COVID-19 starts in rural Canada, it starts with broadband and with supports for small businesses, for tourism, for childcare, for skills development. Our communities are going to come roaring back on the other side of it.'