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Nt'1 Relief Bill To Pass Today

The Commons this morning will approve Covid-19 aid after Opposition MPs vowed to fight a draft bill packed with unprecedented powers for cabinet to tax, spend and borrow by decree. Conservative leader Andrew Scheer called the draft an attempted executive “power grab” unseen in wartime.

“Parliament can function,” said Scheer. “Our institutions can function. Our parliamentary system has seen this country through two world wars.”

Bill C-13 *An Act Respecting Certain Measures In Response To Covid-19* tabled at 3:26 am today details cash subsidies for employers and workers. Introduction of the bill was delayed fifteen hours after MPs discovered cabinet inserted clauses granting itself unchecked spending powers. The revised bill:

- amends the *Income Tax Act* to permit employers with “one or more” staff to apply for ten percent payroll subsidies to a maximum \$1,375 each until June 19;

- enacts a *Canada Emergency Response Benefit Act* allowing uninsured workers over 15 with minimum income of \$5,000 to “apply for an income support payment for any four-week period” to a maximum \$6,750 until October 3;
- grants workers covered by the *Employment Insurance Act* sixteen weeks’ paid leave if “unable to work for reasons related to the coronavirus”;
- amends the *Canada Student Loan Act* to suspend interest and payments until September 30;
- enacts a *Public Health Events Of National Concern Payments Act* allowing cabinet to appropriate “all money required to do anything in relation to that public health event” like the purchase of medical supplies until September 30;
- allows Canada Mortgage And Housing to spend an additional \$10 billion;
- increases transfers to provinces under the *Federal-Provincial Fiscal Arrangements Act* by \$500 million effective April 1;
- allows cabinet to borrow “any amount in extraordinary circumstances” until June 23;
- amends the *Patent Act* to permit cabinet to “use and sell a patented invention to the extent necessary to respond to the public health emergency” until September 30.

“This is an unprecedented crisis affecting all Canadians,” said Government House Leader Pablo Rodriguez. “We must all work together to provide emergency assistance to Canadians.”

The bill was to have passed yesterday until MPs studied a confidential draft granting cabinet new powers to impose “a rate or an amount of tax” by executive order. “We are here to pass measures that were announced to help people get through the next days and weeks,” said Scheer. “What was not proposed was any elimination of the role of parliamentary oversight for months and months ahead.”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau yesterday defended the bill. “I believe in our democratic institutions,” he told reporters. “Why would the government think it’s a good idea to propose a bill to broadly tax and spend without Parliament’s approval?” asked a reporter. “Why would you bring politics into a pandemic?”

“We recognize this pandemic is moving extremely quickly and it is an exceptional situation that requires extreme flexibility,” replied Trudeau: “We’ve been working on drafting the right legislation up until the last minute.”

The Commons this morning approved concessions sought by Conservative MPs that compel cabinet to report biweekly on spending, impose deadlines on emergency powers and mandate weekly oversight hearings of the Commons finance and health committees. Committee members may summon the House into emergency session at any time.

One MP called the draft relief bill “extraordinary flawed”. “Hell, no,” said MP Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.), Conservative finance critic. The draft “gave enormous, never-before-seen powers to the Trudeau government to spend, tax and borrow unlimited sums for the next twenty-one months without parliamentary approval,” he said.

“They could define the crisis anyway they want and pretty much come up with any excuse they’re looking for to spend more without your representatives’ approval,” said Poilievre. “We continued to say hell no.”

By Staff 
