

'We can't afford Throne Speech': Alliance

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Costly social programs hinted at in Prime Minister Jean Chretien's Throne Speech Monday are "feel good," vague ideas that Canadians can't afford and border on irresponsibility, says a local Canadian Alliance riding association president.

"They're the same old promises he's made before, but he hasn't said where the funds are going to come from or who will be saddled with raising it," said Markham's Richard Van Seters. "He's left an awful lot lacking. These are feel good things, making promises he won't even be able to keep."

The speech, delivered by Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson, promised to tackle child and aboriginal poverty, revitalize the health care system, form a plan to ratify the Kyoto Accord, and upgrade municipal infrastructure.

It could cost billions.

And while Mr. Chretien has been accused of intending to spend his way into a lasting legacy, Mr. Van Seters said his only legacy will be his failure to reduce the national debt, which stands at close to \$550 billion.

"We still have enormous debt that has not been tackled and those concerns have been totally ignored. He's giving money to the African nations when we are paying 30 cents on every dollar to pay the debt. It's irresponsible."

But Oak Ridges Liberal MP Bryon Wilfert disagrees — he said Mr. Chretien doesn't have to create a legacy with social policy, his government's success in eliminating the deficit has already done it.

DEFICIT ELIMINATED

"I don't understand all this talk of his wanting to leave a legacy," Mr. Wilfert said from Ottawa Wednesday. "The legacy of this Prime Minister is the fact he's eliminated a \$42.5 billion deficit and has tabled five consecutive balanced budgets. This government has built its reputation on that."

Mr. Van Seters dismissed that notion, crediting downloading to the provinces as the real way recent budgets have been balanced and warned new policy initiatives will be bad news for an already-overburdened taxpayer.

But Mr. Wilfert insisted the federal government will not go "into the red" to realize Mr. Chretien's social agenda and reminded his constituents the speech is a plan, a blueprint of intentions, not a done deal.

"The Throne Speech outlines the government's goals; it's a skeleton if you will. The real meat, the real flesh will be in the budget," he said, adding the government's sixth budget will likely be tabled in February.

"If everything was implemented tomorrow, we couldn't afford it," Mr. Wilfert noted. "The words 'long term' appeared a lot in the speech, long-term aims, long-term objectives. But if we don't have our fiscal house in order, I'm not prepared to go into debt."

Some elements of the plan could be a boon for York Region — one of Canada's high-growth areas — especially if new federal dollars for infrastructure, health care, and affordable housing actually materialize.

"My major focus will be on infrastructure and a health care system we can maintain and afford," Mr. Wilfert said. "There are important strategy initiatives that will go to safe, efficient and environmentally responsible transportation. Health care is a concern for all Canadians and it's not simply about money, it's how it's utilized. Our concern is more accountability and transparency. But everything will be shaped within a fiscal context."

Mr. Van Seters pointed out border security, immigration issues and Canada's position on the U.S. conflict with Iraq were completely ignored by the Prime Minister in the speech.

"Nothing was addressed about the farmers' plight out west either," he said. "He's obviously trying to cater to Ontario where his regional government lies. It's really an Ontario government."

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Concerns about Canada's eroded military were not mentioned specifically, but the speech contained a passing

reference to the fact Canadians expect their soldiers to be properly equipped.

Defence Minister and Markham MP John McCallum was unavailable for comment on this issue, according to his Ottawa assistant Randy Milek.

Mr. Wilfert pointed out the government has committed to a review of defence policy which could include the "re-prioritizing" of existing funds.

And he added the next Prime Minister, who will take office after Mr. Chretien retires in 17 months, is not bound by initiatives laid out this week in any case.

"The new Prime Minister can retain this or that, or not. And a lot of these issues need consultation with the private sector, the provinces and municipalities."

Attempts to reach Vaughan-King-Aurora MP Maurizio Bevilacqua for his impression of the Throne Speech were not successful.

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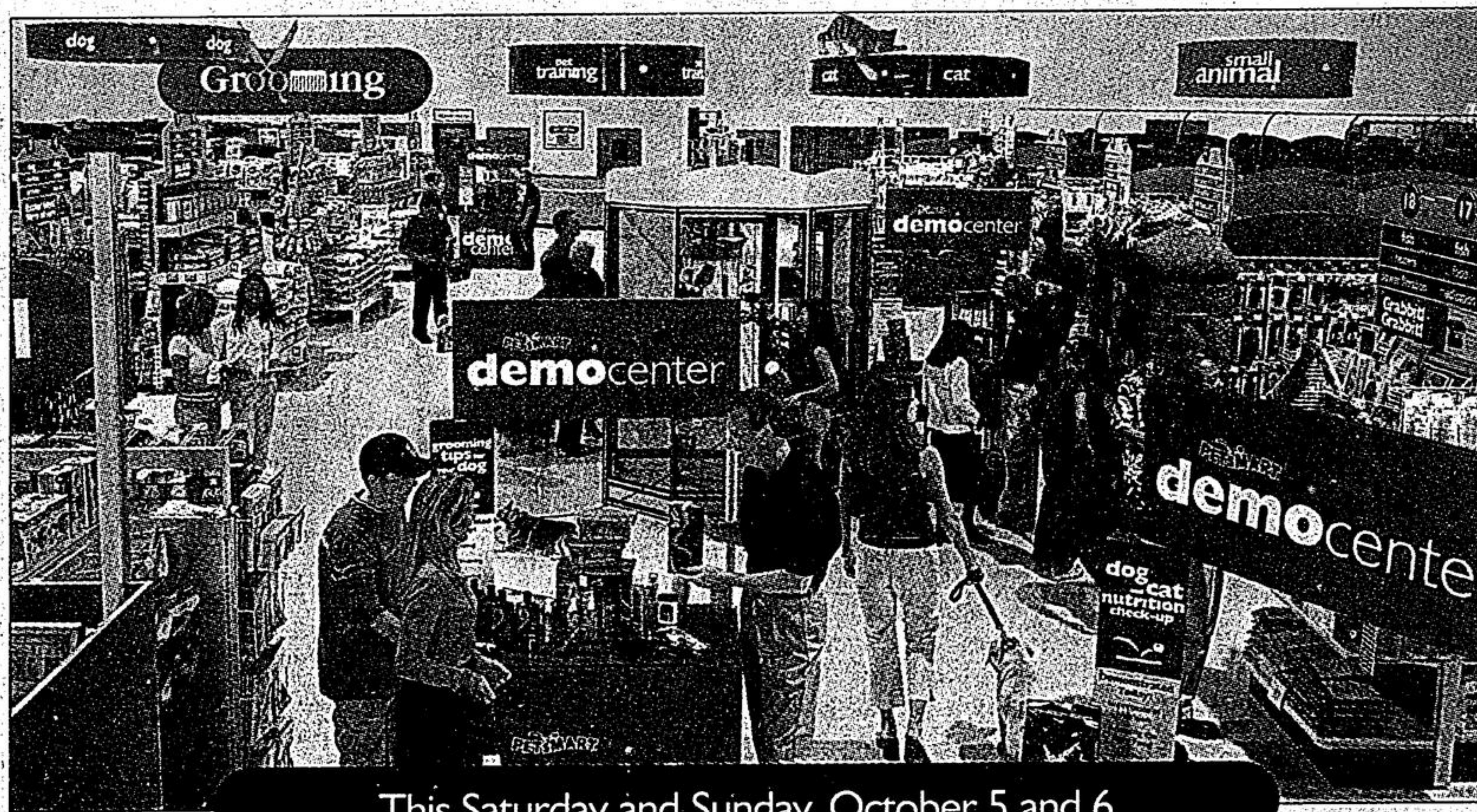
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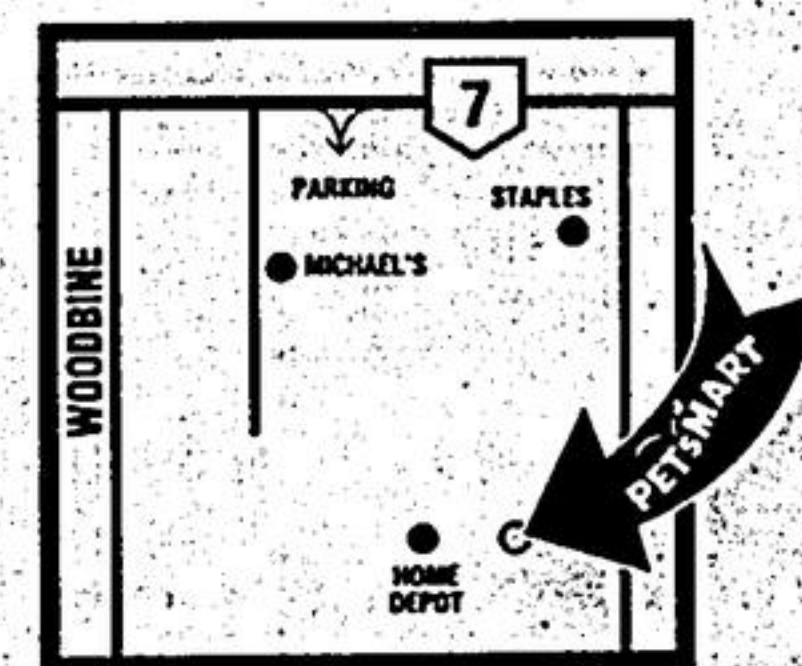
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