

Blind Persons Act

department have given any particular study to the question of the federal authority taking over the financial responsibility of aid to the blind. In all the welfare extension acts we now have before us, with the exception of one, there is the understandable problem involved of consent by the provinces and, on occasion, of changes in the British North America Act, our constitution.

However the problem of blindness is so particularized and so worthy, involving as it does not a million persons as in the case of the old age pensioners or less than 100,000 of the disabled and those with old age assistance, that I hope consideration could be given to it. Perhaps the minister will tell us whether the federal government has considered taking over complete financial responsibility for it. The blind need that extra assistance which nobody else requires and then, having provided it, the provinces could go ahead from there.

I know that raises something which many of us do not like because we want to see all Canadians receiving the same; but in this particular regard I believe this is an avenue that would not be too expensive to follow. It should be the strict responsibility of the federal government, with the provinces giving further aid, and I would like to hear from the minister whether that particular aspect of the problem has been considered by himself and his department.

(Translation):

Mr. L. J. Pigeon (Joliette-L'Assomption-Montcalm): Mr. Speaker, just a few words to say that we are happy to know that the Canadian government has taken those measures to help the blind.

As the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Monteith) indicated, there are in Canada 24,000 blind persons, including 6,000 in the province of Quebec and 175 in the constituency of Joliette-L'Assomption-Montcalm.

In the United States, blind persons are well looked after. They pay no income tax and, when they ask for a pension, they do not have to face a means test.

I wonder if the Canadian government, in conjunction with the provinces, could not study the advisability of establishing an eye bank in every province of Canada. At the present time, there are only two in the country, one in Ontario and one in Quebec. On the other hand, there are about 60 in the United States, which receive grants from the state and the central government.

I wonder if, after consultation with the province, it would not be possible to reach a federal-provincial agreement to increase the number of eye banks throughout Canada. I think it would be good advertising for that effort and would also make it possible to help greatly our blind people, as it is done now in the United States.

(Text):

Hon. J. W. Monteith (Minister of National Health and Welfare): I would just comment briefly on the remarks made by the hon. member for Vancouver East. Ever since the inception of the Blind Persons Act the federal government has had cognizance of the special situation in which these unsighted persons find themselves, in that this is the one assistance act in which the federal government participates to the extent of 75 per cent of the cost, not only in the allowances but in the special care I mentioned.

The hon. member for Joliette-L'Assomption-Montcalm mentioned the possibility of having more eye banks. All I can say in respect of the special consideration suggested by the hon. member for Vancouver East, and suggested in this other matter of eye banks, is that I would hope the new national council of welfare would be able to give all these matters very close study and advise the government as to further consideration.

Motion agreed to, bill read the second time and the house went into committee thereon, Mr. Chown in the chair.

On clause 1—*Agreements with provinces.*

Mr. Carter: Mr. Chairman, I should like to ask the minister whether he can give the committee any statistics with regard to the number of blind persons in Canada, particularly the number of children and the age groups, and whether blindness is increasing or decreasing?

Mr. Monteith (Perth): Mr. Chairman, I thought I gave rather comprehensive figures in my opening remarks on second reading, but I will be glad to repeat them for the hon. member. In 1937-38 the number of pensioners was 1,946. At that time the act covered blind persons aged 40 and over. On this basis the case load rose to 4,512 in 1938-39 and it ran between 5,000 and 7,000 over the next seven years.

In 1947 the age requirement was lowered to 21 years. The number of recipients gradually rose to 11,000 in 1950-51. On December 31, 1951, when the previous legislation ceased to operate and the new old age security, old age assistance and blindness allowances acts