

*Government Orders*

• (1910)

The minister in his announcement said working parents, especially single parents and those trying to move off social assistance back into the workplace, need better access to affordable quality child care. This support is essential if we are to meet our national employment objectives. He went on to say helping to ensure children receive the quality care they need also promotes child development and contributes to the employability of the next generation.

That is quite a statement. If that is true and if we truly believe that, we have to ensure child care is something we work on this year, something negotiated now. We must make a commitment to develop a proper national child care infrastructure program in partnership with the provinces so that children across the country, whether in rural areas, in small towns or in large urban centres, have access to quality, affordable and accessible child care and that the parents have a choice whether they work part time or full time. Otherwise the children will not have the opportunities and the developmental assistance they require.

The United Nations says Canada has one of the worst records of child poverty, second only to the United States, in the OECD countries. That is quite a statement. Normally we like to think of Canada as being well above the United States in most areas. In this case we are only second to the United States.

We know from research and from experts who have told us over and over again that nutrition plays a major role in the development of children from the time of pregnancy to three years. Those are three very important, fundamental years. If good nutrition is not provided to the child, the child will likely have problems. Knowing these things, understanding them and accepting this information, which no one has challenged, we still continue not to address the most important and horrible problem Canada has, the horrendous level of child poverty.

We address things such as youth crime. We talk about it all the time. We strengthen the Young Offenders Act but we do not talk about child poverty, which would prevent some of those things. We talk about a great many things but not about the human deficit we are creating if child care and child poverty are not dealt with.

I would like to see a commitment that the first and foremost priority for the next budget will be to address child poverty. We should immediately introduce an income supplement for the working poor. We should negotiate with the provinces for an enhanced child tax benefit. We must deal directly with the issue of child poverty as well as child care. Those two things are not separate. Poor parents cannot work if they do not have child care. It makes their lives that much more difficult and their children that much poorer.

I believe strongly that if we as a nation cannot make a collective commitment to the children of Canada, and make that our foremost priority, the brave new world of the 21st century we talk about so much will be worse than the world we have today. That generation, our young people of today, will be the adults of that brave new world which will create and develop the economy but they will not be able to take on the challenges they will face.

We have a collective responsibility, just as we had with education. We said everyone should have an education in Canada. It is mandatory to age 16 in most provinces. Why is child care any different? Why is child development any different or any less important? It is more important. A badly prepared and ill nourished child cannot study.

• (1915)

My appeal to the government and to all the members of the House is that in the next year we commit ourselves to making the biggest priority in the budget addressing the issue of work, child care and child poverty. If we do that, I believe strongly that this country will hold together and will meet the next century in a much better way than it is now.

[Translation]

**Mr. Paul Crête (Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ):** Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to participate in this debate, this evening, as the session ends, on the eve of the Christmas recess. I would like to remind the House that the theme of this debate is prebudget consultation. I have taken a particular interest in this practice over the past year because last year's budget surprised us with the closure of the experimental farm in La Pocatière. This information was hidden in an appendix to the budget. Never had that possibility been raised in any prebudget consultation.

I challenge anyone to find any mention of it in anywhere in the consultation papers that were produced. I told myself: "Next year, I will at least check how this whole thing works, see for myself, to make sure that they would not pull another one like that on us". This year, I had the privilege of travelling with the finance sub-committee across western Canada. I noticed that the consultation process is still not broken in properly. It is not perfect. From one place to the next, many of the lobby groups that we meet tell us pretty much the same thing. National themes are repeated over and over. As worthwhile as they may be, they are not necessarily new to us, as we travel from place to place.

On one occasion however, we had groups come to us with very practical suggestions. There is one in particular that I would like to put forward. A Manitoba foundation for local development explained and justified to us an amendment to the Income Tax Act whereby this foundation could assign funds for the development of local communities, rural communities, in Manitoba. They also suggested that this practice be extended to the rest of Canada. I personally found this suggestion very interesting for