

Old Age Security Act

most often repeated concern from old, middle and younger-aged alike was the matter of old age pension eligibility being 65 years of age. My discussions clearly indicated to me that this threshold age is in need of urgent reform. Canadians are looking to other countries that currently provide pensions for men at 60 and women at 55. These countries have undertaken this progressive legislation despite the fact that they have less resources and wealth than our country.

If the Canadian couple I illustrated earlier did have access to pensions at the ages of 60 and 55 respectively, would it not ease their lives? Would it not permit the wife to stop scrubbing floors? Would it not permit the husband to ease up and perhaps pursue a hobby rather than look for more mortar and bricks on yet another construction site? Would it not allow the couple to live a happier, less hectic and less pressurized lifestyle? Would it not also allow other younger individuals seeking work a far better chance of finding that work? It is my opinion that Canadians share this concern and that the answers to those vital questions would be in the affirmative.

Quite often our country's status among other countries is measured in terms of wealth or economic output. While this is a valid and accepted form of comparison, this measurement should also be complemented by a social indicator that would reflect the type of lifestyle that Canadians lead, the benefits they enjoy from their Government and at what age these benefits come into force. If we followed such a practice, we would be surprised to learn that while some other countries trail Canada in over-all economic production, the sum lot of the individuals in those other countries is in some cases superior to that of Canadians.

An important facet of this social equation concerns the elderly and near elderly in our society. Earlier in this debate my colleague, the Hon. Member for Mount Royal (Mrs. Finestone), reminded the House of an old proverb which says that we can judge a society by the way it treats its elderly. I believe that that proverb is a very real and accurate one and one that is central to any discussion we are to have on Bill C-26. This legislation, as I indicated at the outset, moves in the appropriate direction but it definitely needs to be strengthened in order to make up for its shortcomings and it needs to be embodied as one component of a larger and more comprehensive policy thrust.

I hope and Canadians hope that Bill C-26 is but the beginning. While this legislation will no doubt improve the lives of some 85,000 Canadians, what do we say to the other hundreds of thousands of Canadians who are asking themselves: "What about me?" What do we say to the single, divorced or separated men and women of our country who are between the ages of 60 and 64? What do we as a country say about the over-all state of affairs for Canadians approaching their sunset years? We cannot afford to leave these individuals behind. If we do, we cannot truthfully say that Canada works well and fairly for everyone.

Mr. Nelson A. Riis (Kamloops-Shuswap): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to say a few words about Bill C-26, an Act to amend the Old Age Security Act. I would

like to make three or four observations in the short time available to me. My first observation is that I acknowledge that this Bill is a step in the right direction in terms of recognizing one of the many problems that were outlined in the report presented by the Task Force on Pension Reform in December, 1983.

Just to preface my remarks, I would say that I am listening with interest to my colleagues and friends from the Liberal Party who rise to ask why the Government is not recognizing these problems. I would point out that the report commissioned by the Liberal Government through the task force hearings was tabled in 1983. If members of the Liberal Party were concerned about what was happening to the seniors of our country, there were ample opportunities to introduce legislation, particularly after the task force report laid out its recommendations so very, very clearly.

The member of the New Democratic Party who was on that task force, a member who came from British Columbia, wrote a minority report because he did not feel that the task force went far enough. He felt that there were a number of things on which the Government should act immediately. Just to put today's comments made by members from the three political Parties in some context, I think that that was an observation worth making.

We have some concerns about the legislation but we are certainly not going to hold it up. We will be raising these concerns at the appropriate time in committee. However, let us recognize that the benefits provided by the Bill, which basically extend the spouse's allowance to all low-income widows and widowers between the ages of 60 and 65, leaves single and divorced people in that age group excluded from consideration. It is a very arbitrarily defined group at which this increase in pension is aimed. The Bill offers nothing for low-income people who are between the ages of 60 and 65 who have never married or presently are divorced.

As well, it is useful to point out that the amendments, once approved by the House, will not come into effect until September of this year. We are hearing good arguments from all spokespersons that there is a need to move with some haste. I would like to think that we need not wait until September of this year before action can actually be taken.

As the person who last spoke indicated, how we treat the elderly of our society is a pretty clear reflection of how advanced, mature and civilized we are as a country. I think that there is a good deal of room to move in that respect. There is much that can be done.

There are two issues to which I would like to see some thought given on behalf of the seniors of the country, recognizing the contributions they have made to our society, and one of those is the issue of senior citizens' housing. In many communities across the country, both large and small, there is a growing need for senior citizens' housing of a variety of types.

I might say that in the province from which I come, the Province of British Columbia, while the allotments of money are somewhat limited as compared to the federal Government,