

Old Age Security Act

On October 17, 1979 the Clark Conservative Government introduced Bill C-6 which was passed on November 22, 1979. I was pleased to support that Bill at that time. The 1979 Bill changed the existing legislation in two very important ways. Widowed spouses would now receive the allowance from age 60 to age 65, rather than for only six months as was the case in the Liberal legislation. Second, it retroactively included those widows between the ages of 60 and 65 who had been cut off during the previous four to five years.

Nevertheless, even with that progressive legislation there were still weaknesses. If the widow's husband died the day before reaching age 65, although the widow may be between the ages of 60 and 65, she would not receive the benefit. The 1979 legislation also did not extend this allowance to widowers.

Bill C-26, which we are debating today, corrects those two omissions. Bill C-26 will extend the spouse's allowance to all widowed persons, male and female, aged 60 to 64, who meet the necessary income and residence requirements, regardless of the age of their spouse at death. This means that all widows and widowers reaching the age of 60 will be eligible to apply for the spouse's allowance on the basis of financial need.

Permit me to put this amendment into perspective, Mr. Speaker. In the 1979 Speech from the Throne the then Conservative Government indicated its intention to make pensions a priority consideration. The passage of Bill C-6 in 1979 confirmed that intention. While its critics claimed that the Bill did not go far enough, the Government indicated its desire to pursue the matter further when economic conditions permitted.

In the 1984 Speech from the Throne the need for pension reform was highlighted again. We now have the introduction of Bill C-26 which picks up where this Party left off with Bill C-6 in 1979. The actions of 1979 and those which are being carried out here today are evidence of the Government's sincere commitment to act quickly, consistently, and compassionately in the crucial area of social concern. Surely all Parties will be able to support this progressive legislation.

Let me respond to two criticisms that opposition Members have made. They say it does not go far enough. They ask about those in the 55 to 60 age group. Economic deprivation is the same whether one is 59 or 60. I admit that economic hardship is no respecter of age. However, one might easily ask why not 55 instead of 60? How far back can we push the age of eligibility? Do we go to 55 or 50? People may have different answers to that question.

A reasonable and rational decision must be made, especially in view of the severe fiscal constraints imposed on the Government by the huge annual deficit and national debt left to us by the Liberals. The figure of 60 may be defended as a good and concerted attempt to give priority protection to those individuals, especially widows, who are financially vulnerable at this age and are least able at this point in their lives to re-enter the workforce.

A second criticism made by some in the Opposition is to ask about those who have never been married. They correctly say that the single person aged 60 to 64 is left out on the basis of marital status. Again I admit that financial deprivation is no respecter of marital status. However, there is a much greater likelihood that a 60-year-old individual who has been single all his life will either be employed, and therefore ineligible, or will at least have some 40 years of employment experience and will be more able to continue in the workforce.

It would be nice to make this legislation more inclusive. However, such inclusivity is the privilege of a house with its economic books in order. In response to Liberal and NDP Members who say that this Bill is discriminatory, I would like to say that the irresponsible spending of Liberal Governments over the past 16 years, often supported by the NDP, is much more discriminatory to Canadians through the high interest rates, high unemployment, high inflation rate and weak dollar that it produced.

We must remain as positive as possible, Mr. Speaker. An estimated additional 85,000 low-income widowed persons will benefit from this proposed amendment. Some of the most difficult cases I must deal with as a Member of Parliament are those of widows and widowers in the age group which this Bill addresses. This Bill is trying to meet the very real need of people in this age group.

This Bill deals with persons who have just suffered a great personal loss and, particularly in the case of widows, face a second major setback as they find that there are very few options open to them to re-enter the workforce after many years as a wife and homemaker. This Bill will assist these persons through to age 65 in a compassionate, responsible manner. Even in a period of economic restraint we have an obligation to those who need help the most. The Government accepts the fact that we are our brother's keeper when these people are in need. However, the Government also recognizes that we can help only those in need. This group of people has made a very significant contribution to society. Society now owes them at least the assistance that this Act will provide. Therefore, I encourage all Members of the House to support this very progressive and responsible legislation.

Mr. Cassidy: Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member stated that he does not feel that this particular piece of legislation is discriminatory. He talked about the record of the previous Government and so on. Could he comment on why, among those in the 60 to 65-year age bracket who are generally among the poorest in our society, those who never married should be excluded from this particular provision while those who were married are included? Why should there be discrimination against those single people who too often, I regret to say, have had difficulty in the labour force? They may not have had a wholly satisfying life, and when they reach the age of 60 they find themselves condemned to another five years of living on totally inadequate incomes until they qualify for the old age pension.