

*Family Allowances*

Canadians, to the effect that it is in their own interest to have matters of this kind made the concern of the federal government. There is no reason at all why we cannot write a bill of rights that would give an absolute and inviolable guarantee to our provinces over certain matters of a cultural nature which are sacred to them. But so far as matters of this kind are concerned, which bear upon the economic status and the life and well-being of our people as Canadians, it seems to me that we should move, without further delay, in the direction that I have already indicated. I suggest that if we were moving more clearly in that direction it would allay some of the fear about family allowances depressing wage standards. I recognize the steps that have been taken in this direction so far as war-time conditions are concerned. I hope that there may be no retreat from that position.

But even so, Mr. Speaker, I am not worried about the introduction of family allowances depressing wages or the working conditions of our people. For one reason, public opinion is too strong on this point. The people of Canada have done a great deal of thinking about social and economic matters in the last ten years and particularly during the years of the war. It is also true then when people have their standards raised a bit, that is the very time when you cannot turn around and push them down. It is when people are most deeply depressed that they can be most easily taken advantage of. When people are on the way up, when they are feeling their position and having their importance in society recognized, not just by talk but by something real like this measure, they become stronger and less subject to abuse at the hands of vested interests.

I should like to quote a sentence or two from an opinion expressed by the joint committee of the labour party and trades union congress in England in 1930 on this matter, when they said:

During industrial conflicts the unions will be very considerably helped by the existence of such a scheme—

The reference was to children's allowances.—since the workers' children will be removed from the fring line and a great factor of weakness thus removed.

I submit that at the present time the worker's bargaining position is weakened by the fact that his wife and children are dependent upon him to the very limit. But if there were a certain amount of independence for his wife and children—I use the words "certain amount" advisedly, because this is not very much in the way of "independence"—it removes his wife and family from the fring

[Mr. Knowles.]

line and strengthens the position of the employee in bargaining with his employer.

I submit, for example, that the introduction of unemployment insurance has not weakened, but rather it has strengthened the position of labour and of the trade union movement. The fact is that labour's position and the strength of the trade union movement are much greater in Canada to-day than they ever were. Therefore I am confident that this move will not result in a depression of wages or working conditions. For one thing, as I said at the outset of this section of my remarks, public opinion in Canada and the trade union movement simply would not stand for it.

Another argument which is sometimes used against family allowances in cash is that instead of these allowances we should have improved welfare services. The argument implies that, rather than run the risk of giving cash to people who might not spend it as wisely as they should—a false and unworthy argument—it would be better for the community to organize social and welfare services which will see to it that the proper care is provided for the children. In my view it is not a case of one or the other; we should have both. By this I mean that there are some things which can best be done on a community basis. There are some things which will serve our children best if we have them organized as welfare services. But even after you have done that, we in this country place a very high premium upon family life, upon the independence of the family, upon the relationship between parents and children. Consequently I think it is most desirable that an effort should be made to put into the hands of parents cash to equalize as far as possible the position with respect to their children, and the control of that extra money should be in the hands of the parents themselves. So that I say it is not a case of one or the other of these two things; we should have both; and I trust that in the years which lie ahead we shall have an increase in the amount of the family allowances, and also that as we go along we shall improve the services by which we minister to the needs and the welfare and the health of our children.

Another argument which is sometimes used is that instead of providing family allowances the government should allow wages to go up. That would be a trap for labour to fall into if it did not have its eyes open. As a matter of fact, in the days before we had a wage-freezing policy, in other words when theoretically it was possible for wages to rise, they did not do so. We had thousands of families in this country living under depressed conditions and children suffering from malnutrition.