

Government Orders

There is also another strong implication of this particular legislation. As was mentioned by myself and others in this House when we debated Bill C-69, we believe very strongly—and I know most Canadians involved in the social assistance areas believe it—that this is a threat to the universality programs which previous governments in previous years have tried to put in place, that social safety net that we believe so strongly is necessary in order for Canadians to feel that the particular society we live in has not given up on them, is not that mean and cruel society of other countries in the world, but in essence is a society prepared to look after its own and is prepared to pay for it out of its taxes and out of its own pockets.

I want to put in context where this particular program came from. There is a particular belief by a lot of people in this country that the New Democratic Party is the only party that believes in social programs, the only party that is quite prepared to stand up for the little guy when he has difficulty in looking after himself. I want to speak to that for a moment and put to rest the myth that it is the party that has done what is necessary for the poor of this country.

I want to talk specifically about the war on poverty which began in earnest in the mid-1960s. Under the then Prime Minister, Lester B. Pearson, the government passed a few major pieces of legislation. That particular government, as we all know, was a Liberal government. That government was the government that put in place the medical care insurance plan, the Canada Pension Plan that we as Canadians are all so proud of, a guaranteed income supplement for pensioners who were having difficulty making ends meet on the meagre Canada Pension Plan, and the Canada Assistance Plan.

Those four initiatives in the mid-1960s were part of a process that the then Liberal government went into to try and put in the social contract that we hear so much about. That social contract was put in place to allow Canadians to feel comfortable, that if times get difficult, like the world recession we went through in the early 1980s in which there was massive unemployment, there would be a tremendous rise in the social assistance program.

The Canada Assistance Plan rose by almost 12 per cent in those years of high unemployment and massive world recession. Did the government of the day say it had to

cut this particular program down because of the people who are using it, that it simply could not allow that to go past a certain percentage point? This government across the way seems to believe that anything over 5 per cent is not acceptable.

No, we did not do that. We worked as hard as we could to try and help those Canadians to help themselves. We got through that particular recession because of that. We have now broken the contract. It has been 25 years since the enactment of this Canada Pension Plan, the Canada Assistance Plan, which was heralded as a model of federal—provincial co-operation.

I want to emphasize to members across the way that in order for this federation of ours to work, co-operation must be a two-way street. The provinces will co-operate with the federal government if it does not do things by decree arbitrarily. I hope it will understand that this particular move has done nothing to help all of us, as Canadians, to co-operate to make this country of ours work more effectively. All the constitutional changes in the world will not work unless we have that co-operation that is necessary. A measure like Bill C-32 is not going to help that whole process one little bit.

Mrs. Beryl Gaffney (Nepean): Mr. Speaker, I too am pleased to stand here in this House today to speak on the bill before us, Bill C-32, an act to amend the Canada Assistance Plan.

When I say I am pleased to stand here, I am displeased at the same time because such a regressive bill is something this country does not need, particularly the three provinces that are going to be most seriously affected.

Through this legislation the government will cap the Canada Assistance Plan transfers to three provinces: Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario. According to the government's own estimates, the three affected provinces will lose \$2.135 billion in federal transfers over the five-year period through 1995 to 1996.

The affected provinces estimate the loss to be much higher. Ontario, for example, believes that the legislation will cost it \$1 billion alone in this 1991 year.

As we know, the Canada Assistance Plan was enacted in 1966 to assist and encourage the development and expansion of social assistance and welfare services throughout Canada.