

Canadian Human Rights

Mrs. Pigott: One area of concern in the human rights bill is its provisions for dealing with discrimination aimed at the handicapped. We in Canada are still guilty of cruel discrimination against the 15 per cent of our people who, through no fault of their own, are physically handicapped. That equals half the population of Quebec, or the total population of the three prairie provinces. We have victimized them through our ignorance, oppressed them through our laws, or lack of them, hidden many of them from our sight and kept them from our communities by constructing buildings which make it all but impossible for the handicapped to exercise their basic human rights. For years now the handicapped have tolerated public insensitivity to their situation, but we live in an age when the level of knowledge in medicine, science, technology, communications and other fields has reached an advanced stage, and the "Forgive them for they know not what they do" attitude of the handicapped must go.

Disabled people have the same needs as the rest of us—a good job, an adequate income, a choice of housing, an opportunity to take part in recreational activities, personal independence and a chance to contribute to their society. These are not privileges; they are their basic human rights.

The newest developments in medicine are aimed at restoring the cardiac, the stroke, and the severe accident case to as normal and meaningful a role as their impairment will allow. I am concerned that the environment these people are coming into should be prepared and ready to take them on a fair basis.

How have we denied these rights to the handicapped? Buildings in Canada are monuments to our thoughtlessness. The catalogue of our obstructions is almost endless. Steps, whether one or a long flight, are a great obstacle to the handicapped. In my own riding during this past month I have been unable to find a place in an office building that could take care of the handicapped. I had to go to a second floor, where there are stairs.

Awkward, heavy or swinging doors, hard to manage door knobs and handles, narrow entrances, elevators in which the buttons are placed too high to be reached by someone in a wheelchair, and numerous other constructions effectively say "keep out" to the handicapped. The majority of our buildings in Canada, both public and private, restrict access to thousands of Canadians who are wheelchair bound, to those who use crutches or other walking aids, who have diseases such as arthritis or heart conditions, who are elderly, blind, or disabled in some other way.

One of the strong points in the proposed bill is that it aims at prohibiting discrimination in employment on the ground of physical handicap. We hope that under this bill an employer will no longer be able to argue that his office is inaccessible to wheelchairs, which thereby denies employment to a handicapped person. The alternative for a handicapped person who is denied employment on such unfair grounds is the kind of government assistance which, in financial terms alone, forces poverty level living.

The very strength of the proposed legislation in dealing with employer discrimination toward the handicapped is also one of

its weaknesses, since problems other than employment are not resolved. One of the greatest needs of paraplegics and other wheelchair users is proper housing. The design of most Canadian housing is discriminatory to the handicapped. We need buildings with units for wheelchair users distributed all across our cities so that handicapped people can live wherever they choose.

Implicit in the goals of human rights legislation is the nurturing of a quality of life for Canadians which promotes the individual citizen's search for dignity and a meaningful control of his or her own existence. Only through the use of one's capacities can satisfaction and a genuine sense of worth be achieved.

The quality of the environment is a factor in the quality of life. A large gap exists today between the possibilities offered to the able-bodied and those available to the handicapped. If the environment in Canada is to serve the whole population equally, it must take into account those who are handicapped, one person in seven, and allow for their development and self-expression.

The image which our society assigns to the handicapped becomes the self-image of each handicapped person. It affects their expectations and their behaviour. By our negative view of the handicapped we not only limit their prospects but also deny ourselves the benefit of their many talents. Through our thoughtlessness we have turned what would otherwise be a medically identifiable condition of physical impairment into a handicap. We have turned a physical disability into one which can often place the handicapped in a mental wheelchair as well as a physical one. We have done this by maintaining an attitude which magnifies the individual's perception of his or her disability. No matter how physically disabled a person may be, inside the body is a human being that has enormous potential to live and contribute. We must work to build an environment which sustains people's morale and provides an impetus to pursue goals.

● (2130)

Sadly, we have also created a handicap from another physical situation—age. We stereotype into a universal category anyone over the age of 65.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mrs. Pigott: Chronological age, degree of biological aging, and personality are all lost in a blurred image which denies individuality. The stereotypes of old age lead to negative expectations.

As the Advisory Council on the Status of Women has pointed out, physical handicap is defined in clause 20 of the bill and includes any form of congenital or accidental infirmity. Two important restrictions limit protection to handicapped persons. First, discrimination prohibited with regard to the handicapped person only applies in matters of employment: in matters of services, facilities and housing, nothing is foreseen for the protection of the handicapped persons to benefit from these services normally available to other Canadians.