

*Supply**[English]*

Ms. Beth Phinney (Hamilton Mountain): Madam Speaker, yesterday in the debate on women and the budget, I chose to concentrate my remarks on the cancellation of the Court Challenges Program. I was then asked to speak on the subject again today. There are many compelling reasons for the reinstatement of this program so I am very pleased to address this issue again, specifically as it will affect Canadians with disabilities.

In my remarks yesterday I noted that nobody believes the government's explanation for the termination of this program. It has said there is enough jurisprudence but in fact we know there are many important areas of law where there is no jurisprudence at all. It is really quite outrageous for ministers of this government to stand up in this House and make these ridiculous statements. They have said it is time for the provinces, and even the private sector, to support this kind of program.

This strange approach reflects the bizarre mindset of this Conservative government. No one has explained why the private sector should have any responsibility for funding a constitutional human rights program. It is very clearly the responsibility of the federal government.

I certainly would be pleased to see private sector funding of this kind of program, but I am not holding my breath waiting for it. The government has given no indication that it has actively encouraged the private sector to get involved. I guess civic minded businesses are just expected to come forward and say: "here, take our money".

As for the provinces, I think the federal government knows very well what a poor record some of our provincial governments have in defending their linguistic minorities. If these governments were to suddenly show great leadership in defending and promoting human rights, Canadians would welcome this role from them. Although I do not accept the abdication of federal responsibility in this area, I think that the Court Challenges Program would enthusiastically welcome the involvement of the provinces. It would allow the program to become involved in many very important areas of law in which there is little jurisprudence.

Once again we see the Conservative government unloading responsibilities on to the provinces unilaterally, arbitrarily, and without consultation. I would be very happy to be proven wrong on this, but to my knowledge we have had no evidence to suggest that the federal government has actively sought funding from the provinces.

This is becoming a typical pattern for this government. Abandon federal responsibilities, declare that the provinces should fill the gap, but do not actually ask the provinces or work with them to make sure it happens. We all know very well that the provinces are not exactly rushing to take on new financial commitments. This government has hit them hard enough already, and this is supposedly the government of the new federalism.

The Conservatives have described this move to cut the Court Challenges Program as a cost cutting measure, but nobody is buying that. I want to point out that according to experts such as former Supreme Court Justice Bertha Wilson, this program provided excellent value for money. It was recently brought to my attention that lawyers of the Court Challenges Program earned on average about 66 per cent or two-thirds of the salary earned by the average Canadian bar association lawyer in Ottawa.

As a member of the Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Status of Disabled Persons, I have attended every one of the meetings that the committee has devoted to this issue. We have heard from the director and other officials of the program. We have heard from a number of expert witnesses, from the Canadian Bar Association, Canadian Human Rights Commission, as well as the Deputy Ministers of Justice and Multiculturalism. Every single one of these witnesses has spoken positively of this program. They have all stated that it has been an efficient and effectively run program.

I believe there is widespread agreement in the three major parties that this program should be reinstated. The decision to abolish the program was clearly a hasty and ill-conceived move that the government has come to regret. We even heard that the Prime Minister did not know that this decision had been made. To its credit, this government has been known to reverse unfair decisions in the past. I can say that we in the Liberal Party would