

Supply

Ten years ago, the government financed construction of 30,000 new low-cost housing units per year. Today, this number has dropped to 20,000.

[English]

We must also move to bring in child care legislation which has as its purpose and fundamental goal an increase in the number of spaces that will be available for children throughout Canada.

• (1040)

This in itself will help thousands of Canadian women who love their children, who want to care for them but who are now locked into welfare. They cannot afford adequate child care and so are forced to stay home when they would prefer to be spending part of their time working in the economy out of the house and part of their time looking after children but they know that they cannot leave them if there are not adequate child care spaces available.

One recent survey showed that there were over 21,000 Canadian women who specifically said they would prefer to be off welfare, would prefer to be working out of the house if only this nation of ours had taken the proper steps some time ago to ensure adequate child care service is available. We must begin to make that child care spacing available for these women.

I would like to propose that the Prime Minister or the federal government before long convene a national conference on the elimination of child poverty, inviting first and foremost the provincial governments because much of the responsibility as we know in this federal constitution of ours to deal with this problem resides with the provinces. Also invited should be municipalities to send delegates, volunteer agencies, the trade union movement, chambers of commerce, service clubs and poor peoples' representatives themselves.

There should be a national effort to talk about and understand the gravity of the problem and to understand that things can be done. This conference should be called. In my view such a grand coalition that could be brought together should not be a one-shot deal, but it should obligate itself to meet on an annual basis to establish targets. I am aware we cannot do this overnight, as I am aware if we begin to spend money now and target spending to overcome the disgrace of national poverty

for children certain other priorities would have to be set aside. No serious man or woman in political life can escape from that. I am aware that it cannot be done overnight and without some sacrifice in some other domain, but by God I am saying we should now organize our political community like we have never done before. This can be done by bringing in groups that have not been involved before, setting out a national target, and monitoring it on an annual basis until we eliminate child poverty in this country.

I want to conclude with these observations. Whatever their philosophical basis, whether Canadians are Conservatives, Liberals or New Democrats, I know there is not the slightest bit of difference in terms of their commitment to the well-being of children. However else we may differ on other political matters, and the differences are real and serious, on this issue there is no difference on the commitment to overcome child poverty. I believe there would be no difference about that goal.

I think that if we speak to all of Canada and if all Parties took this on, we could get a response. I am convinced that a great attempt to mobilize the energy and effective imagination of Canadians would meet with a great response from the people of Canada. We have the resources. We have the ability. We have done it before on pensions. We have done it before on medicare. What we need now is to demonstrate the same will concerning the needs of our children.

For the sake of our children, let us find that same spirit of reform, of hope, of courage, of tenacious intelligence that has led this nation of ours to great accomplishments in the past. Let us affirm today in this Parliament that as a nation by the beginning of the 21st Century—only 11 years away—child poverty in this great Canada will be a relic of the past.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Perrin Beatty (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to participate today in this debate about child welfare and child poverty. However, before addressing the motion perhaps the House could bear with me for a minute while I make some remarks with regard to the hon. gentleman from Oshawa.

The hon. member, when he moved his motion and gave a very eloquent address today, did not make mention of the fact that this is probably the last opportu-