

*Social Policy*

**Miss Bégin:** Yes, I was. A few members on this side did point out that we might encounter some inequities in respect of older women, unattached individuals between the ages of 60 and 64 who were in need, but who thought a guaranteed annual income would look after their needs. Since the spouse's allowance program began, approximately 5,800 beneficiaries have lost benefits because of the death of the older spouse. Of course, when they reach 65 these persons will themselves become eligible for the old age pension. Therefore, there are approximately 3,750 of all past beneficiaries who have yet to qualify for the old age pension, since they have not yet reached the age of 65. That is the problem to which we should address ourselves. Members should decide whether they are ready to allocate resources to this program as a top priority, resources which would have to be taken from funds available for other programs, and I insist on this.

The hon. member for Kingston and the Islands said the other day, if I am not mistaken, that the department had a hidden \$400,000 which could cover the pensions of all the people losing spouse's allowance. I have myself checked with the department and I find there has never been such a hidden sum of money. We do not know what the hon. lady is referring to. She says that extending the spouse's allowance program would not involve additional expenditure, but it would involve additional expenditure and that is the cause of the problem. I will personally not accept any solution which creates, in turn, another inequity. At one time we were pretty sure that a guaranteed annual income was to be expected in the near future but we faced every year more difficult economic conditions and a conservative movement in Canada, both small "c" and big "C", shifting each day more to the right, which did not permit the government to take the action which we think is fair and necessary.

Since it is a question of money I shall talk about money for a few minutes. I shall not accept continuance of the spouse's allowance until the age of 65, as the hon. member proposes. I cannot accept it because it would be creating a worse inequity for the woman next door, on the same street, who is called Miss Somebody instead of being Mrs. Somebody. That is a situation which I cannot support at all. Nor can I support the proposal to lower the age of pension for all persons from 65 to 60.

**Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** You will get there some day.

**Miss Bégin:** No! I think that is a mistaken idea. I regret that the hon. gentleman was not born a few years earlier than he was, before the time he lived in parliament, where he has done a lot of work for social reform because I honestly believe a pension at age 60 is a measure which should have existed at least 30 or 40 years ago but not today. It is the way I would have designed social policy at that time, because in those days life expectancy was much shorter than it is now, when the average is 78 for Canadian women and 76 for men. It was something over 50 years then. In the second place, the hard, physical type of work which was so common, work of a type

which is less and less prevalent, should have been recognized as justifying a pension at an earlier age.

Today we are witnessing a reverse movement. We are living in a society in Canada where there is a longer life expectancy, the longest in the world, in fact, due to better diet and living conditions. We are also witnessing a movement among older Canadians against the validity of the idea of compulsory retirement at the age of 65. In addition, I should mention that the cost of providing an old age pension for all at the age 60 would be around \$2 billion.

Then again we have never asked ourselves what type of life we would be offering all these Canadians who would be 60 and over and in retirement. I know the New Horizons Program is a good one and I believe members on both sides of the House approve of it, but it is a limited program with limited funds, permitting some initiatives but surely not fulfilling the lives of people who have 20 more years to live after retirement. Our society, like North American society generally, has not yet given sufficient thought to the room it wants to give older Canadians, where it wants them to serve, how they can be integrated into movements and associations without being, in a sense, totally "ghettoized". It is true there are movements and associations of older people only, and there is nothing wrong with old age citizens groups of any sort; but I find it a pity that Canadian society cannot benefit more extensively from the experience, the thinking and imagination of older people who could easily serve, for example, in day care centres, or helping teachers by telling stories or explaining ways of hunting or other skills that they learnt in their own lives to children—

[*Translation*]

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier):** Order, please. I regret to interrupt the hon. minister, but her allotted time has expired.

**Miss Bégin:** Mr. Speaker, I should like to say very seriously that Canadian society must make an effort to support senior citizens' groups. This has indeed already started and, to look into this question, we shall certainly hold seminars, symposiums and other such earnest efforts to define the problem and to consider the active role we want them to play in our society. The government gives every assurance to the House in this regard. We carefully consider ways of helping all those in need, particularly those who get the spouse's allowance only to lose it the following month on their spouse's death. It seems to me we could help them, even on a temporary basis.

It takes time to close the small bank account, to cash Quebec or Canada savings bonds, to collect the survivor's benefits under the Canada or Quebec pension plan, possibly to sell the house, however humble it may be, and a few extra months could eliminate the odium of discontinuing their old age security pension the very month their spouse dies. I think that if the opposition were interested in truly helping senior citizens, it is possibly in that direction that we should go.