

Old Age Pensions

(Mr. Pickersgill). Had I voted I would have voted in support of the amendment.

OLD AGE PENSIONS—ALLEGED DELAY IN
ANNOUNCING GOVERNMENT POLICY

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, before you leave the chair I rise to state a grievance. The grievance I wish to present to the house, and more particularly to the government, is one which I am satisfied is shared by thousands of people in this country; indeed, as I shall indicate in a moment, it is shared by several hundred thousand Canadian people.

My grievance is that the government is stalling on the matter of making it clear to the Canadian people what it is going to do at this session regarding the old age pension. I realize, Mr. Speaker, because I have been told this several times in answers to questions on the orders of the day, that the government takes the position that this is a matter of government policy which it is free to announce in due course. There is no question but that the government has the technical right to hide behind that statement, but I submit, Mr. Speaker, that it is grossly unfair to the people of Canada; that it is utterly lacking in leadership and utterly lacking in statesmanship, for the government to stall in connection with this matter which is, as I say, the concern of a great many people in this country.

I made the statement a moment ago that I believe my grievance to be shared by thousands of people, if not by hundreds of thousands. The basis for that statement is statistical. The fact is that there are nearly 800,000 Canadians in receipt of old age security payments under a statute of this parliament, not including those on old age assistance. Back in 1950, when the question of old age security was under study by a special committee of both houses, we were informed—and I have on my desk the report of that committee with the statistics contained therein—that at that time something over 43 per cent of the people of Canada then 70 years of age and over were drawing the old age pension which was in effect at that time, which was under a means test. In other words, in 1950 over 43 per cent of Canadians 70 years of age and over were so hard up that they were able to meet the means test which was in effect at that time. I am satisfied that the situation is still the same, namely that more than 40 per cent of the people of Canada who are 70 years of age or over are in difficult circumstances. If there were still a means test more than 40 per cent would still meet that means test and thus qualify for such a pension.

Forty per cent of the nearly 800,000 Canadians who are drawing old age security thus amounts to some 320,000 of our senior citizens who are drawing the \$40 a month who, I submit, Mr. Speaker, by virtue of the statistics I have given are in need.

My grievance is that these 300,000 or more Canadians, plus others on other forms of social security, are being treated most unfairly by a government which simply says from time to time when we ask our questions on the orders of the day, "These are matters of government policy concerning which if any action is to be taken, that action will be announced in due course". Mr. Speaker, the people of this country thought this matter would be referred to in the speech from the throne which opened this session of parliament. No reference was made to it in that document. Nevertheless it is still generally believed in Canada, and I share that belief, that this government will not go to the country this year without doing something about old age pensions.

In other words I am not merely making the plea that something be done. I know that something is going to be done. I know that this government does not dare go to the country without doing something about the amount of the old age pension. My plea is that that "something" be substantial, that it be a worth-while increase. More particularly my plea tonight is that there be no more stalling or delay, but that an announcement be made soon as to what the government intends to do.

There are those on the other side of the house who suggest that this is a budgetary matter and that it may be announced along with other social security improvements and other benefits for the Canadian people when the Minister of Finance brings down his budget. I suggest that that is not an excuse behind which the government can hide, because the budget is an item of parliamentary business in which, apart from the reports the Minister of Finance makes, legislation affecting our tax laws is proposed. If any changes are to be made in the old age pension, family allowances or the disability pension, they will have to be not by way of some announcement the Minister of Finance may make on budget night, but by way of legislation introduced in this parliament.

I submit therefore that the government cannot hide behind the excuse that this is a matter which has to be held until the budget is brought down. These are matters of legislation which, as I say, should have been referred to in the speech from the throne, but since that was not done, parliament and the