

Private Members' Business

The government has established explicit guidelines about how to modify buildings to make them accessible to physically handicapped people, but there is no mechanism to ensure the rights of disabled citizens are honoured. There are no sanctions.

When a disabled person's rights are infringed, one recourse is to take the complaint to the Human Rights Commission. But this process is time consuming and emotionally draining. It can be very expensive.

These people do not have to face yet another inconvenience. We should be ensuring that their rights are protected and respected at all times.

I have seen one positive step recently. The committee on human rights and the status of disabled persons recently released a report on the plight of the disabled. I am glad that the Secretary of State accepted the whole report in principle. It supposedly will be used to amend acts like the Canadian Human Rights Act and design federal programs for disabled people.

We should not forget that this government must admit it has also failed in the very issue of accessibility. For example, the Canadian Human Rights Commission examined 32 federal programs this summer around the country to see if they meet barrier free design standards. Very sadly, all 32 failed.

Disabled people do not only face barriers in privately owned reception halls. They face it everywhere, including in federal buildings, buildings that are paid for by our tax money. The government must learn how to act on the issue of accessibility and encourage the private sector to do the same.

This past spring, the United States enacted a very important piece of legislation for its disabled citizens, the Americans with Disabilities Act, which forces employers to accommodate disabled employees unless the employer can prove physical changes to his or her operation would be too expensive or disruptive. Madam Speaker, we should adopt this type of program. There needs to be regulations on the construction of new buildings in Canada.

I realize that modifying buildings to make them accessible is a very costly venture, especially for owners of older, and smaller reception halls. But we must do it.

The government declared its intentions to make Canada accessible to all Canadians a long time ago. It is time to deliver on those promises. An excellent way to start is to convince provinces and municipalities to encourage private owners of reception halls to provide washroom facilities on the same floor.

At the same time, the government must seriously consider the recommendations of the committee on human rights and the status of disabled persons. We must develop goals and effective strategies to make all buildings accessible to everyone. We must enforce these standards.

Many other rights depend on them, including the right to have a reasonable employment.

In conclusion, I would like to say that indeed the hon. member for Saint-Léonard has the foresight and sensitivity in caring for the needs of the disabled and the elderly. He introduced his private member's motion a year ago and the standing committee of our House did present its report this June and in essence supported the intention of my hon. colleague.

I now challenge fellow members to support this particular motion as an important first step to achieving our goal of equality for all Canadians, including the disabled and the elderly.

Hon. Alan Redway (Minister of State (Housing)): Madam Speaker, last week I received a letter from friend of mine who is in Vancouver. He is a handicapped man. He is in a wheelchair. But he is also the Social Credit member of the legislature from Vancouver—Little Mountain. His name is Doug Mowat. That letter reads as follows. It is addressed to myself and it says:

Your indication that the entrance to one bathroom in all future social housing will be accessible for persons in wheelchairs as well as walkers is a major breakthrough and demonstrates the strong commitment of your Ministry and the Government of Canada to physically disabled persons.

Every time you see a person in a wheelchair, you'll know that you made it possible for them to use the bathrooms in C.M.H.C. sponsored buildings! Seriously, we highly commend you for this step. It will not be a costly modification, but one that will mean so very much to both disabled and elderly citizens.

It is signed by Doug Mowat, the member of the Legislative Assembly in British Columbia for Vancouver—Little Mountain.

The modifying of entrances to bathrooms in social housing projects is certainly one way in which we can break down the physical barriers which keep handi-