

Private Members' Business

I cannot help but relate this to my own situation. I really cannot tell members how much I really love my little grandson. I might as well tell the whole world that he will soon be having a little brother or sister. It is such a tremendously touching experience for us. We are so privileged to have a wonderful, loving relationship between our children, our son-in-law and our grandchild.

• (1110)

I cannot, for the life of me, see why anyone would put a barrier between children and their grandparents. Therefore we are not dealing here with people who have a normal relationship. That is true for probably 95 per cent of people whose relationships are not torn. As in almost all legislation, we are trying to introduce measures that will accommodate those people where a relationship is broken and there has to be some kind of intervention.

We are asking all members of the House to support the bill. In this way people who cannot reach out and touch and hug their grandchildren will be given at least occasionally the privilege of doing so. We are asking that those parents who would stand between their children and the grandparents to carefully think about what they are doing when they introduce these barriers.

Barring a response from parents we need legislation that would require them to give to some disinterested party, like a court if necessary, their reasons. If there is a valid reason for maintaining the barrier I am sure that the courts would understand. If there is not a valid reason then we believe it is in the best interests of children and grandparents to be able to see each other, to talk to each other, to send and receive letters, to send and receive phone calls in order for them to be able to communicate and to build on their relationship.

In conclusion, we have so many young people in our society who are anchorless. They have had so many disruptions in their lives. Nothing is more solid than a familial relationship between children and parents, between children and grandparents that will give them, on an ongoing basis, a sense of security and belonging.

I urge all members to support the bill. Let us do what is right for the children of our country.

Ms. Beth Phinney (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, 1994 was declared the International Year of the Family. The theme as defined by the United Nations is Family, Resources and Responsibilities in a Changing World.

In making this proclamation, the United Nations outlined some basic principles. The first of these principles is that the family is the basic unit of society and therefore deserves special attention.

The widest possible protection and assistance should be given to families so that they can assume their responsibilities in the community. Another principle is that families take different

forms and serve different functions from one country to another and within each country.

This is very important. Changing social and economic conditions are bringing to the fore new issues affecting families, particularly children. One of the realities that cannot be ignored is that many marriages in Canada now end in divorce. A related fact is that many children are directly affected by these divorces although it is difficult to determine the exact number because there is no official information about out of court custody decisions. We know, for example, that in 1990 approximately 34,000 children were involved in divorce cases in which the courts made custody decisions.

From a social policy perspective, this means that Canada's laws, policies and programs should take into account the many diverse needs of families today. More specifically, our laws restricting divorce should reflect our society's changing needs and continue to ensure that the best interests of the children are met. That is why I am pleased to be given the opportunity to comment on Bill C-232 which proposes amending the Divorce Act to promote grandparent access.

• (1115)

I want to start off by saying very clearly that I believe the relationship between grandparent and grandchild is something very special, especially after the parents divorce. Grandparents can be an important resource to children. They can offer care and support and buffer children from the many changes and stresses associated with family breakdown. I therefore agree wholeheartedly with the basic principle that a child's continued contact with grandparents, indeed with all members of the child's extended family, is something that very often is in the best interests of the child.

I emphasize that the best interests of the child test is a standard that has come to be accepted both in Canada and internationally as the appropriate standard to apply with respect to matters relating to children. It means that laws directly affecting children should focus on the needs and best interests of the child rather than on the rights of adults.

In applying this standard it is important to acknowledge the writings of sociologists and psychiatrists on the subject of the effect of divorce on children. Researchers generally agree that the breakdown of the parents' marriage brings about a major crisis in the lives of most children and adolescents. It is an acutely stressful event for a child. Equally important is the fact that researchers also highlight the detrimental effects on children of ongoing conflict and litigation.

There is widespread agreement that the most tragic and clinically vulnerable children are those who become the object of continued acrimonious custody or access battles. It is not difficult to imagine how upsetting such a court battle would be to a child with the stress, uncertainty and loyalty conflicts that