

difficulties. Mr. Reg. Watson, late head of Pensioners Concerned, put their case succinctly:

During our working years, we all paid our taxes; we defended our country in at least two wars and many lost loved ones; we educated our families to take their place in society; we contributed to welfare and many of us still do; we supported our country in every way humanly possible even through the world's greatest depression . . . We ask not for charity, but our just due.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I submit that the government is introducing political charity for the aged rather than justice. We shall not see the kind of national unity that I think is necessary until we treat the aged with more justice.

The minister this afternoon spoke of how expensive it would be if we were to fix the age of eligibility below 65. We must remember that we spent \$900 million of public funds on unemployment insurance benefits because unemployment had risen above 4 per cent. We went through that debate and argued a good deal. Nevertheless, \$900 million was spent because unemployment rose above 4 per cent. That amount of money would have enabled us to pay the combined old age security and guaranteed income supplement to all Canadians over the age of 62. I submit that spending that amount of money in stabilizing our society would have been far better than spending it on unemployment insurance and bailing out the unemployment insurance fund.

If the minister will permit me to say so, he displayed a good deal of insight into the problems of the poor, handicapped and aged in our society when he dwelt at length on the need for a comprehensive program. He said he is looking forward to the forthcoming federal-provincial conference that will try to evolve an integrated approach to all problems in the social security field. I hope the minister will not present this to us as a discovery that a comprehensive program is needed. This has been the approach of the Canadian Council on Social Development, and many other experts, who have looked at the problem. For some time chaos has been developing, literally, because there are three levels of government trying to approach social service programs. I point only to the report of the Croll committee on poverty. Unfortunately, too much of it is still sitting on the shelf. It states in great detail that the welfare system in Canada today is literally in chaos. The whole system of welfare in this country costs \$6 billion. There are five million Canadians at or below the poverty level. Poverty is indeed the great social issue of our time.

• (2140)

I commend the minister for looking at the problem of the aged in its totality. I think I can say that he, with many members in this House from all parties, is envisaging a society in which there is much more justice not only for the aged but all components of our society, the handicapped, the infirm and those for whom society has a responsibility to protect and support.

The forthcoming conference will undoubtedly bring us back to the question of the constitution. Within the past couple of years a joint House of Commons-Senate committee on the constitution travelled across this country. It received innumerable briefs and compiled a report that I, as a newcomer, think is very good. It stated that we will have to realign not only our fiscal priorities but the

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responsibilities between Ottawa and the provinces. I suspect the minister's view is going to be so comprehensive that it will bring us, in concert with the provincial ministers with whom he will be meeting, back to the constitution. He will say to this House that we cannot make any substantial improvement in a comprehensive approach to the social problems of this country until our constitution is changed.

I wonder how long it will take us to change the constitution. In many ways I wish it could be done overnight, but obviously that is impractical. However, I hope we do not lose sight of the need of our constitution to emphasize what is absolutely necessary in our society, namely, decentralization so that those who need services can be serviced by governments that are close to them and will no longer be subjected to so many programs set down by Ottawa to be delivered at provincial and municipal levels, thereby raising the costs of government in those communities and provinces.

All of this is to bring us to a very vague goal, a concept of improving the social services in this country if we are patient enough, if we can all agree on what a comprehensive approach will actually bring and, then, how we can get a new constitution out of it. However, that will not be sufficient to meet the circumstances that we face. These circumstances were clearly outlined by previous speakers, including the hon. member for Hillsborough (Mr. Macquarrie). Many senior citizens today are in a situation that does not render them eligible for a guaranteed income supplement. Their savings are being eroded. They are subject to inflation. They are at an income level that hurts them most when it comes to food and rent, particularly at a time in life when they are not able to augment their very meagre income. They are the ones who are suffering.

I admire the long-range goal of the minister. However, when he says that the minimum age cannot be gradually lowered from 65 to 60, and that we cannot give consideration to spouses between the ages of 60 to 65 being eligible for old age security when the first partner of the marriage goes on retirement—improvements that are absolutely necessary in our society today—because there are so many other factors that have to be taken into consideration in light of a comprehensive approach, I say that time simply will not allow us to take this casual approach and meanwhile grab a headline that the government is increasing the old age pension to \$100—and isn't that a wonderful thing!

It will be necessary to keep up the pressure on the government, and I do not care which party forms the government. The government of this country has an obligation to consider justice and has a high priority for the aged. They should not be subjected to any more gamesmanship. I hope we can see some improvement very shortly.

I have commended the senior citizens of this country for becoming politically active. We have certainly seen evidence of this in the past few years. I have said to them before, and I say to them again, that an increase in their political activity and political demands on the government will produce results. The combination of their political demands and our understanding and compassion for the