

● (1240)

The emphasis of that report was to dispel the myth that a person with a disability or a handicap is somehow suffering from an illness. Those people are not ill, they are simply disabled. They are whole in every other respect. However, the thrust of the points made by the Department of Justice in this paper is that they are ill or sick. I find that offensive and it displays a mentality that exists not only in some parts of the Government but in the Canadian public and people elsewhere. We must dispel that myth in order to come to grips with our collective discrimination against people who have a disability.

I would have been impressed if the Minister of Justice had said that in order to enforce any rights under the Charter it is necessary to have public funding. Disabled groups simply do not have the funding that is necessary to enable them to press cases before the court finally to determine what their rights are. There is a real need for such funding, which in fact was apparently recognized by the Conservative Party during the last election campaign. During the campaign the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped circulated a questionnaire to every candidate and each Party. Several weeks ago COPOH circulated the response to those questionnaires to all Members of the House.

One of the questions asked of the Government when it was the Official Opposition was if it would support the provision of that kind of defence fund to those organizations and individuals in order to press their cases before the courts. The Conservatives gave the assurance that they would do so but only to organizations concerned with issues which the Government considered to be of national importance.

Organizations do not necessarily reflect the views of individual disabled Canadians at the community level. Surely if the Government still intends to provide those necessary funds for disabled organizations, it should also consider implementing our recommendations in the *Obstacles* report. Disabled people are quite capable of looking after their own interests.

Why does the Government not consider making funds available to COPOH and other consumer self-help organizations for them to use as advocates on behalf of disabled individuals? We made that recommendation in the *Obstacles* report. That committee, which was made up of Members from all sides of the House, was totally non-partisan and I hope that anything I am saying now is not construed as being partisan because that is not my intention. I believe that this particular issue, above all, is one that is non-partisan and one which every Member of the House can agree with.

I do not stand here to say that the NDP is the only Party and I am the only Member who cares about disabled individuals because I know that that is not the case. For instance, I know that the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Mr. Crosbie) was quite concerned and interested in the committee's report with respect to disabilities affecting the native population. Their difficulties are entirely different from those facing disabled individuals living in urban communities. In northern communities, for example, the fact that

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there are no roads makes it extremely difficult to be mobile in a wheelchair. Transportation costs make it very expensive to own or repair a wheelchair in the north, and when one considers that disabled people are at the low end of the income scale, it becomes virtually impossible for that individual to have the kind of mobility that such a device makes available to them. I know that the Minister is aware of these problems facing native peoples and wants to address them.

The assumptions made in the discussion paper entitled *Equality Issues in Federal Law* are unfortunate. There is a bald statement that individuals who are disabled may not be suited to be employed in Canada's Armed Forces. I see absolutely no reason why an individual who is confined to a wheelchair could not be employed by the Armed Forces in the communications area. No one even argues that a person in a wheelchair should be on the front line in an infantry troop, but we must open our minds and stop assuming that a disabled person has every opportunity closed to them. Surely a better approach would be to consider how best we can assist a disabled person to fit into an employment field rather than putting up other barriers, preventing adequate employment opportunities for him and saying that his disability makes him unemployable in certain categories. I would ask the Department of Justice to reconsider its approach to developing legislation to assist disabled individuals.

With respect to immigration, we heard many witnesses before the Committee on the Disabled and Handicapped. We heard about reuniting families from around the world. Our Government could set an example for other governments in the world by asking if it is fair to continue to deny a family the right to reunite simply because a child whom they were forced to leave in the country from which they emigrated happens to be developmentally handicapped. I suggest that is not fair at all. The argument used for preventing their reunion is that the child is developmentally handicapped—commonly referred to as mentally retarded—and the child would be a burden on the state in terms of health costs. That is the argument which is made. It helps to cement the myth that persons who are developmentally handicapped are somehow mentally ill. They are not, they are mentally disabled.

● (1250)

A young child who was developmentally handicapped appeared before the committee in Vancouver. He made the point that he deeply resented being forced to be represented by the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded. In fact, he wrote his presentation himself; it was one of the best papers presented to the committee. A member of the committee said: "If you don't like being referred to as being mentally retarded, what else would you like to be called?" The child said: "Simply because I have an IQ of 60 does not mean to say that I am stupid. Members of Parliament might be stupid but I ain't". The person who asked the question deserved that answer.

In the early stages of the committee hearings we had problems understanding the difficulties faced by these people.