

Private Members' Business

For once, parliamentarians are again challenged to show their social conscience, to come to the needs of those people who need our help, the disabled. This fiction of a deadline is indeed a fiction. It should not extinguish any claim to inherent rights to benefits for which they have paid in the past as members of the working force.

On that note I thank you for the opportunity. I thank the member for Don Valley East for the determination, the commitment and the courage with which he pursued his private member's bill.

Mr. Sid Parker (Kootenay East): Mr. Speaker, I, too, would like to congratulate the hon. member for Don Valley East for introducing a private members' bill which has an effect of making CPP disability more accessible to those Canadians in need.

I congratulate the member for getting the full consent of the House on his motion.

I have spent a great deal of time and energy on issues and cases dealing with CPP disability, both in my role as my Party's pension critic and as the member of Parliament serving the needs of my constituents in Kootenay East.

The current poor state of the public disability pensions is an issue that all members of this House have had to deal with. It is truly a non-partisan issue.

I am happy to support a bill which promises to expand access to benefits for Canadians with disabilities. At the same time, I am sure that my colleague would agree that there are other areas of CPP disability that desperately need to be addressed by this House.

Notwithstanding recent efforts by this government, I think that we can all agree that the current legislation covering CPP disability is flawed.

I would like to take a few moments to identify a number of other areas which demand immediate action. The very definition of the term "disability" contained in existing legislation excludes thousands of Canadians who have legitimate and serious disabilities.

• (1730)

Under existing legislation a person who is unable to work due to a disability does not necessarily qualify for disability assistance. Disabled Canadians who seek independence and dignity through retraining and education

risk their disability benefits because existing legislation says that a legitimate disability is one which prohibits any initiative whatsoever.

It is outrageous both in financial and moral terms that Canada's public disability pension scheme does not recognize the importance of retraining and education.

The same logic applies to part-time work. The current legislation forbids even the most part time of work. Part-time work can be the first step for a Canadian with a disability to eventually re-enter the work force.

Should we say to Canadians who make these initial efforts that they are putting their financial security at risk? Of course not. What we need are more incentives, not less.

Bill C-280 addresses the question of accessibility and there are a number of other areas that also need to be looked at.

Under existing legislation a person who does not apply for CPP disability within the first 15 months is ineligible. I have seen first hand people who have been excluded for this ridiculous regulation. Privately most public servants who deal in this area will tell you that the information flow from CPP to Canadians with recent disabilities is very poor. People do not understand what is available to them. In many cases people simply do not know that CPP disability is there.

The problem is no doubt worse for people with low literacy skills or new Canadians whose first language is neither English nor French. In other cases people receive initial disability coverage from other sources and then find out that they can no longer get CPP coverage.

It only makes sense that if persons become disabled on a certain date and are documented and verified they should qualify for disability pension. The 15-month limit clearly needs to be removed.

I could go on and on, but I hope that I have made my point. I applaud the hon. member for his efforts to bring about the change, and I hope that we can all work together to improve our disability pension plan.

In our discussions in committee on the changes with regard to Bill C-39, which we have just reported back to the House and will be debating very shortly, we had witnesses come before us. I wish every member of Parliament could hear the stories and the problems that are out there regarding our Canada Pension Plan, the