

Canada Pension Plan

With regard to the first issue, the one that has been discussed by the last two speakers, may I say that this is another of those instances in life which occur from time to time when two valid principles happen to clash.

I think there is validity to the principle of universality, which says that in a society like ours we are all in it; we should all share in its responsibilities and in its benefits. There is also the principle of religious freedom, of respect for the clearly held views of individuals. It just happens in this case that these two principles clash. I am not happy about breaking the principle of universality because I think that any social insurance scheme works best when, as Churchill once said, we bring the magic of averages to the benefit of millions of individuals. However, I recognize the strong appeal that has been made by one or two clearly defined religious groups.

The language in the bill is very precise when it makes it clear that the right to be exempted from the provisions of the Canada Pension Plan will be extended only to a person who belongs to a religious sect that has established tenets and teachings that oppose the acceptance of benefits from any private and public insurance that provides for payments in the event of death, disability, old age or retirement, and which hold that that sect or group must practice and make provisions for the support of dependent members, provisions that are reasonable in view of their general level of living.

It is also provided that any such sect or group must have been in existence prior to January 1, 1966, which was the date on which the Canada Pension Plan came into being. In other words, this bill does not open the door wide to individuals who just do not want to pay a tax to claim some kind of religious scruple, and thus benefit by it. There has to be clear, bona fide evidence of a deeply held religious conviction practiced by people for a long time. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, despite my tendency to put the greater weight with respect to social legislation on the principle of universality, I am not opposed to this bill being passed.

If my hon. friend from Waterloo-Cambridge (Mr. Saltzman) were here he would probably want to get into this debate and say not only is he not opposed to the bill but that he is strongly in favour of it being passed. Because he, like the hon. member who has just spoken, has a number of groups of the kind clearly defined in the bill in his constituency.

So I think the government is to be commended for having wrestled long and hard with this issue, and for having come up with a reasonable proposal which I think, even though some of us may have some misgivings about it, we ought to accept. As I have already said, other parts of the bill are concerned with technical details that ought to be improved, and there is the provision for legal expenses in certain cases. All of this ought to be passed without question.

But, Sir, the main reason I wanted this bill not to be in the category of bills that get passed without debate on a Friday afternoon is that I wish to express my disappointment that the bill before us to amend the Canada Pension Plan does not have in it the major and important things, which the government of course tells us are yet to come. I know that the Canada Pension Plan can be amended

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

twice, thrice or even oftener in the course of a session or the course of a year, but it is at the point when a statute is being opened that it is possible to get various matters corrected. Since we have been asked to accept this little bit of amendment to the Canada Pension Plan, I make a very strong plea that the rest of what the government has promised as amendments to the plan be brought forward in the current calendar year, 1973.

There are quite a few details of the Canada Pension Plan that some people would like to have improved, such as those dealing with problems that arise in the case of people who are between 65 and 70 years and able to earn a little bit from employment, and so on. But the two main things that need to be improved are the ceiling on the annual escalation and the level of the yearly maximum pensionable earnings.

The government is discussing these matters with the provinces. It has declared its eagerness to remove the 2 per cent ceiling on the annual escalation of pensions. It has declared its eagerness to raise the yearly maximum pensionable earnings. But I am a bit concerned when the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde) says that he hopes this will be in effect by January 1, 1974, but never made any clear commitment to that effect.

I realize that he has to reach agreement with the provinces and all that, but it seems to me that if the provinces agree on either one of these points, then it should be brought before us. There will be a great deal of disappointment, and justifiably so, if when January, 1974 comes around pensions are still escalated by only 2 per cent, when the cost of living is rising by 5 per cent, 6 per cent or 7 per cent per year.

I express to you, Mr. Speaker, my appreciation that you have sat quietly in your Chair. You have not called me to order for talking about something that is not in the bill. Maybe I am putting that idea in your head right now, but I will not abuse your kindness any further. I make the very strong plea that, since the House has co-operated with the government in putting through this little bill amending the Canada Pension Plan, the other major amendment, the one that removes the ceiling from the 2 per cent escalation and increases the YMPE, be brought before us this year, and definitely in time so that, like the family allowances measure, it can come into effect on January 1, 1974.

● (1550)

Mr. Douglas Roche (Edmonton Strathcona): Mr. Speaker, one of the great things about the Conservative party is that there is room for diversified opinion. Indeed, this is nothing to be ashamed of. Rather, it is something to be proud of that in our party we see things from many different points of view. Let me say this, however, especially to my good friend the government House leader, that if the Conservatives were running the government we would hopefully program legislation in a more systematic manner. We would not be attempting on a Friday afternoon to bring in a bill that I and the hon. member for Provencher (Mr. Epp) were assured by the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde) would have 24 hours' notice. I do want to express my protest especially on behalf of my colleague, the hon. member for Provencher, who had prepared a speech to be given on second