

The Address—Mr. Epp

relationship between economic renewal, more jobs, and the lower incidence of the number of Canadians living below the poverty line. That is why I say that the record should not only be judged, but it verifies what the Prime Minister has said and what the policies of the Government have been.

In short, 1985 was a year in which the standard of living of the average Canadian family rose. The poorest Canadian households not only shared in the over-all improvement but actually began to reduce the gap between their living standards and those of the average Canadian family. I believe that the Prime Minister can legitimately claim some credit on behalf of the Government for that progress. It is what it is—it is progress.

We made policy decisions to provide a fiscal and monetary environment under which real growth exceeded expectations in 1985. It was only exceeded by one country, namely, Japan. That was an investment in the Canadian people. What is pleasing to me is that Canadians realized the dividends by responding to that environment. If any additional credit should be given, that is, primary credit, it should be given to Canadians who understood, appreciated and developed their own plans within the environment outlined by the Prime Minister for the country. We fully accept that no Government can take full credit for these trends. By the same token, our critics cannot indicate that the Government is totally responsible when the trends are in the opposite direction. We are encouraged by these figures. We commend the efforts of individuals and businesses across the country who have made them happen.

Time permits me only to briefly review for the record a few of the Government's priorities for the next session. I apologize to Hon. Members for that. Therefore I will not cover the whole social policy area. I look back briefly only because the principles of social policy that we have followed are borne out in the initiatives that have been carried out in this place and across the country.

We believe that social justice demands that the greatest help should go to those in greatest need. We believe that social justice demands that government policy should be an investment in people, in order to enable them to plan and achieve their own goals. We believe that social justice involves more than the benefits that people receive through the state. The majority of public issues emerge from people's private troubles, and the solutions are not always or even primarily financial. Fostering a social environment of caring, respect for the law, freedom for individuals, preserving the values of family and community, tolerance for others, and balancing rights and responsibilities involves every part of our population. We obviously believe Government to be a player, but not the only one.

I would like to bear out in practical terms these principles. The principle that the greatest help should go to those in greatest need is reflected in two measures that have already been announced in this Parliament. One was the extension of the spouse's allowance which benefited approximately 50,000

of the poorest Canadians, most of them women. The refundable sales tax credit has been welcomed by social groups as timely and innovative. Low-income families will be the beneficiaries of this new measure, as well as of changes the Government has made to the child tax credit in terms of higher benefits and advance payments.

● (1200)

We do not intend to stop dealing with the issue of fairness, however, just because we have made progress. The process of tax reform is intended to achieve greater fairness than that which exists today in the tax system, and any reform will take into account those provisions of the tax transfer system relating to social benefits. The Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) has spoken to this issue and I need not comment further except to emphasize that when the Government puts forward plans for tax reform, it is social justice as well as economic renewal for which we are striving.

The second principle, that social justice seeks to help people by investing in them, is reflected in the process that has been made on pension reform. For a decade, Governments have debated changes to the Canada Pension Plan and the rules governing private pension plans. As you know, Mr. Speaker, we have reached an important milestone in these changes that deal with early retirement, disability benefits, part-time employee participation and credit splitting to name some of the changes that have been brought in.

On behalf of the Government, I am pleased to reiterate that on January 1, 1987, these major changes will come into effect in Canada and many Canadians are already phoning our offices, not only to endorse the changes but to thank the Government and the Prime Minister for the leadership that was taken. It comes down to national reconciliation. It was only possible to do this with provinces, some of which have different political philosophies than us, but all which know that national reconciliation as led by the Prime Minister is good for Canada, and good for the people. That is why we got an agreement on the Canada Pension Plan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Epp (Provencher): Pension reform is important because it represents an opportunity for people to invest in their own futures. We want people to take greater responsibility for their retirement because their futures are at stake and because people should be not limited in retirement to enjoying only that which can be provided through the state. What is interesting is that the Canadian people believe that too. It is not only us who are saying it. When talking to ordinary Canadians, the same thing applies.

The same principle applies in the area of child care. When the Martin Task Force reports to the House on child care, and when the Government responds to that report, we will be judged in part on how well we have invested in the future of our children and their parents.