

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, February 1, 1983

The House met at 11 a.m.

• (1105)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

OLD AGE SECURITY ACT (NO. 2)

MEASURE TO AMEND

The House resumed from Wednesday, December 22, 1982, consideration of Bill C-131, an Act to amend the Old Age Security Act (No. 2), as reported (without amendment) from the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs; and the motion of Mr. Dantzer (p. 21795).

Mr. Gordon Gilchrist (Scarborough East): Mr. Speaker, I am not usually inclined to speak on non-scientific or non-economic issues to an empty House of Commons and to Government Members who do not listen anyway. However, I have a few remarks to make on a topic about which I feel very strongly, both for the deleterious effect it will have on senior Canadians' ability to live in dignity, or even to survive in some cases, as well as the breach of faith and contract which this represents between the Government and its citizens.

All Canadians acknowledge and support restraint and moderation in spending. Indeed, Government spending is exactly what should be restrained, but that should not come from past contractual obligations, or from needy senior Canadians who cannot defend themselves. Most Canadians are more than willing to share the burden of reducing inflation, including our seniors, and most Canadians are able to adjust their lifestyle to their incomes. Not all are, of course, and certainly not the unemployed; but the 87 per cent of Canadians who are working are able to maintain a reasonable lifestyle, even if some belt-tightening is required.

The real tragedy of this, the richest country in the world, is that one in seven Canadians cannot find work, and because of the loss of tax revenues from these unemployed, the Government now wishes to break its moral obligation to defenceless senior Canadians.

The tragedy rests in the failure of the Government to have invested wisely in the productive aspects and in the job-producing aspects of a healthy Canadian economy over the past 20 years. If instead of selling off our valuable natural resources to other nations we had devoted our tax dollars to the support of advancing technologies and the manufacture of all the products needed by less well-endowed nations, there would today have been more jobs than there would have been Canadians to fill them.

If we had invested wisely in the infrastructures of a sound productive economy, we would not be debating this disgraceful Bill today. What we, the citizens of the richest and most literate country in the world, should be debating is how we could be improving the Canadian lifestyle and the lifestyle of other world citizens who are not blessed, as we are, with either our resources or our abilities. But here we are today, the supposed leaders of our country, debating the cutting back—the cutting back on the moral obligation to aid many of our senior Canadians, both men and women, who have, through no fault of their own, unless age is now a fault, left the work force and are now no longer able to influence or add to their own income to offset the inflationary costs which are largely the result of this Government's failed economic policies and massive bureaucratic overspending.

There may be no written contract between the Government of Canada and retired Canadian seniors, but there is a clear and strong moral contract between the Government and people who have given 40 or 50 years of their lives to building this country, paying their taxes and raising their families and who now are the taxpayers of today.

• (1110)

Has the Government surveyed or in any way asked today's taxpayers, the sons and daughters of today's seniors, if they in fact want the moral responsibility to their parents' retirement withdrawn? I think the public of Canada would give a resounding no to such a breach of moral contract.

Let me quote the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Miss Bégin) when she introduced this "mean and wretched measure", as described by the Hon. Member for Kingston and the Islands (Miss MacDonald). The Minister said:

We are asking 1.1 million old age pensioners to help lead the way in the fight against inflation. I am very conscious of the sacrifice we are asking of them.

I doubt that very much. I doubt that she, any other overpaid and underperforming Minister of this Government, any of the rest of us Members or, for that matter, most of the working public, can have any possible conception of the trapped feeling, the despair and anguish of a senior Canadian who is too old to work and is unable to meet the daily and weekly costs of an existence which the rest of us have defined as the poverty line.

The Minister claimed that the so-called Guaranteed Income Supplement, which is not deindexed, will protect the 600,000 or so of the hardest hit pensioners, particularly single pensioners whose income is less than \$8,900 per year or married couples under \$15,000 per year, and those two out of every