

Old age pensions (including pensions to the blind)—

51. Old age pensions, including pensions to the blind, administration, \$42,505.

Mr. McGEER: I do not want to take up the time of the committee unduly, but this is a matter with respect to which I have done a good deal of work this session. I had hoped that during this session parliament would have moved to extend to old age pensioners in Canada something of the same measure of consideration that has been extended to many other classes of people, none of whom are more deserving of the attention of parliament and of the ministry than are the old age pensioners. This government has assumed an enormous war burden, but it has not been lacking in its appreciation and fulfilment of its domestic duties during this period of war crisis. The government has increased the pay of the soldier; it has improved everything required by the soldier in the way of clothing, food and shelter; it has extended a measure of consideration to the soldier's dependents, and I think in this regard we as Canadians can proudly say that we are caring for our armed forces and their dependents as well as any nation in the world. We have taken care of the wage-earner by means of bonuses and controlling the cost of living, and in numerous other ways others have been taken care of. But we have neglected to recognize the old age pensioner as a class that is worthy of just as much attention as we have extended to others.

This year the matter came up by way of a question to the minister to ascertain whether or not the cost of living bonus could not be extended to the old age pensioner, and I must confess that I was deeply concerned with the reply that the minister gave, because I believe that in all of the social reforms that are facing us to-day, success in dealing with them is largely a matter of attitude. The attitude of the minister to the old age pensioner seemed to me to be a repudiation of well established Liberal policy, and following that statement which was made in the house on April 1, I wrote to each of the provincial premiers throughout Canada the following letter:

On April 2 last I wrote to each of our provincial Prime Ministers enclosing a copy of *Hansard* covering the debates in the House of Commons of April 1st last, and drew attention to certain statements made by the Minister of Finance which I felt were of vital interest to all provincial governments.

In view of the replies received, copies of which I enclose, may I again draw your attention to the position taken by the Minister of Finance which I think may be fairly summarized as follows:

(1) The responsibility for old age pensions is primarily of provincial jurisdiction;

(2) The amount paid to old age pensioners is inadequate;

(3) The dominion government will not contribute any portion of any increase in the amount payable;

(4) The provincial governments are now in a better position to meet the cost of old age pensions than is the dominion government;

(5) The dominion government will give consideration to a request made by substantially all of the provinces for a reconsideration of the maximum limit in the Old Age Pensions Act (see *Hansard*, April 1, 1943, pages 1789 to 1793 inclusive).

I at once challenged the position taken by the minister because I believed that the settled policy of the Liberal party and our government is as follows:

(1) The British North America Act should be amended so that:

(a) The principle of the old age pensions which is sound, would become the exclusive obligation of the federal parliament;

(b) All old age pensions should be administered under one national policy;

(c) All costs, administrative and otherwise, should be borne by the federal government.

These conclusions I believe correctly summarize the old age pension policy enunciated by the Right Honourable W. L. Mackenzie King, now Prime Minister, when he was describing the policy of his government which passed the present Old Age Pensions Act in 1927, despite the fact that the act of 1926 had been disallowed by the Senate.

I enclose herewith a copy of the records in *Hansard* containing the relevant remarks of Mr. King to which I have referred.

Until the Hon. Mr. Ilsley's statement of last November, and repeated in the house April 1st—

And repeated substantially I think here again to-day:

—I have never known of any change in the policy defined by Mr. King.

In view of the attitude now taken by the Minister of Finance, the provincial governments must act if old age pensions are to be changed from a provincial to a national responsibility.

What is needed at the moment is a request by the provincial governments that:

(1) The British North America Act be amended to nationalize old age pensions;

(2) The age limit be reduced;

(3) The maximum payable be raised;

(4) Many of the arbitrary restrictions now in the act and the regulations be repealed;

(5) The policy adopted for old age pensioners should be extended to include pensions to the blind and mothers' allowances;

(6) The proportion paid by the federal government for pensions and administration should, pending the amendment to the constitution, be increased to ninety-nine per cent.

These requests, if acceded to, would put the policy as enunciated by Mr. King into effect and extend a similar measure of that favourable consideration which has been given to wage earners through the cost-of-living bonus, to soldiers and soldiers' dependents whose pay and allowances have been increased, and would raise the pension standards to what is now generally recognized as reasonable and just.