

At the time, those on the government side accused the critics of this legislation of fear-mongering or exaggerating. Our predictions have come true and the government continues to follow this erroneous path of cutting funds to those Canadians who are most vulnerable: those Canadians who are living on something around 50 per cent of the poverty line. As if that is not bad enough, the government's purpose here is to reduce the money available to the poorest of Canadians even further. The government says that British Columbia, Ontario, and Alberta are fiscally strong and can afford to take the cuts they are being given. I think we have seen over the last little while that even these richest of Canadian provinces are finding it difficult to make ends meet, and are not fiscally strong.

• (1300)

Regardless of that, the people receiving social assistance that will be directly affected by the cutbacks in Bill C-32 are not fiscally strong. They are the poorest of Canadians, as I have pointed out. Half of Canada's poor live in these three provinces affected by Bill C-32. Being poor in a rich province is the same as being poor in a poor province.

I suggest that when those government members from British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario visit their ridings, they meet those Canadians who are the brunt of this bill. Most of them are vulnerable children who have nobody to speak for them. They are the weakest of the weak. These children are the ones who will be most affected by Bill C-32 because children make up the largest group of recipients of social assistance. When we take money from social services, we take money from children and food from their mouths.

There are over 1 million children living in poverty in a wealthy society like Canada. It is not just statistics. These are real children, real people. Yet just before Christmas I was appalled to read a quote in *The Globe and Mail* from the spokesperson from the office of the Minister of Finance, who said that everyone is not as rich as they once were, but this is Canada. Everyone is still pretty affluent.

This exhibits an incredible lack of understanding of the problems faced by millions of Canadians who live in poverty in this country. Everyone is not still pretty affluent and, of course, there are hundreds of thousands

of Canadians who never were affluent. We are not talking about reduced corporate profits here. We are talking about families who do not have the means to provide the basic necessities of life.

Food banks are not popular because people like to go to food banks. People go to food banks because after the 19th or 20th day of the month there is simply no money left to buy food to put on the table. There is no money for children, and no money for the parents either. People go to food banks because they do not want to starve. It is not a question of luxuries. It is a question of survival.

When the finance committee heard witnesses on Bill C-32, as was the case when witnesses appeared on previous pieces of legislation imposing a cap on the Canada Assistance Plan contributions to Ontario, B.C., and Alberta, nearly every witness talked about how disastrous this bill would be for Canadians trying to subsist on welfare. All those who worked the front line trying to help poor Canadians pointed out how this bill would make life worse for those Canadians who are already suffering the most.

One witness said that to the federal government the Canada Assistance Plan is one of many budget items on an expense sheet. It is just a line. To people living on social assistance the Canada Assistance Plan is a lifeline. Welfare is their means of livelihood. It is not an intellectual exercise to try to balance a budget.

We have overwhelming evidence that social assistance benefits across this country are woefully inadequate. This inadequacy affects children disproportionately in a totally unacceptable way.

Yet this government is planning to continue the cap on CAP. It is taking millions and millions of dollars out of money available for social assistance in the middle of a recession when the need is greatest. It affects children the most. When the Prime Minister recently ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, he adopted many commitments to placing children ahead of other charges on the national revenues.

He committed himself, his government and Canada to putting children first as a charge on national resources. Yet Bill C-32 will attack those very children once again by reducing the money available in those three provinces for the basic necessities of those children.