POVERTY—GOVERNMENT POSITION—PEOPLE LIVING BELOW POVERTY LINE—MINISTER'S POSITION

Mrs. Shirley Maheu (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville): Madam Speaker, it has now been four months since I rose in the House and asked the Prime Minister to do something about the fact that the province of Quebec is the second poorest province in Confederation. On June 15, the Canadian Council on Social Development announced that a quarter of Quebec families lived below the poverty line. Madam Speaker, that is a total of 615,000 households or two and a half times the population of Laval.

Since its investiture, this Government has tried to project the image of responsible management. It tried to convince Canadians that it was the best administrator of Canada's economy.

If we refer to the data submitted by the Council last spring, we see that this Government's economic policies are not the answer to the needs of Quebec and Canada.

Since the Tories came to power, they have constantly added to the load carried by low-income Canadians. The Government has withdrawn from unemployment insurance, leaving this fundamental social program in the hands of business and labour. It has introduced a 9 per cent tax on goods and services, which will have a devastating effect on families living below the poverty line and on families living in this country's remote areas.

This Government's policies have widened the gap between rich and poor in Canada. While there are plenty of opportunities for those who are well off, the future for Canadians at the bottom of the scale is far from rosy.

I am sure the Minister will answer that this Government has created more than 300,000 jobs in Quebec since it came to power in September 1984. Madam Speaker, we are not only concerned with quantity but also with the quality of those jobs. The Government must realize that the kind of job a person has is very important. That we continue to have working poor in Canada is shameful and must stop.

Madam Speaker, 29 per cent of Canadian families living below the poverty line have at least one member who is employed the year round. How can this Government be so confident about its economic agenda when the ranks of the working poor are swelling every day? Can you imagine what the statistics look like when we consider the number of families that depend exclusively, on seasonal employment? Does this Government realize what impact its unemployment insurance and fiscal policies will have on the poorest regions of this country?

Madam Speaker, Canadians are sick and tired of hearing the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance hold forth about the number of jobs that have been created and how wealthy they have made this country, while one-third of our poor families have one member working full-time. People are sick and tired of the disappointments and problems they have to live with under this Government.

The fact is that this Government does not invest in the future of this country. It has cut transfers to the provinces for post-secondary education, for instance. Instead of giving Canada's youth the skills it needs to be competitive on world markets, the Government has decided to invest unemployment insurance funds in tenuous training programs. Basically, Madam Speaker, this Government would prefer to invest in retaining the low-income status of many of its citizens instead of giving them the education they need to become independent and prosperous.

• (1805)

As concerned citizens, we must demand that this Government be fair and equitable. This Government has been anything but that. In the first place, the Conservatives signed the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. They promised to provide the best possible programs to help displaced workers escape the poverty trap. Unfortunately, when the effects of the Agreement became obvious throughout the country, the Conservatives decided that there was no longer a real need for substantial programs.

The Government then decided to withdraw from unemployment insurance. It is obvious that the Prime Minister thought that it was wise for the federal Government to withdraw from an important social program before his dear friends to the south defined it as a subsidy. This policy will take food from people's mouths and invest in training programs that will just put people in routine, dead-end jobs, without breaking the poverty cycle.

To top it all off, Madam Speaker, we have the new goods and services tax. The Minister of Finance said that it would be revenue neutral. He has since changed his mind and decided that it would be a way to reduce the deficit. With this new source of revenue, the Government will squeeze $5 billion more from the Canadian people. Some Hon. Members on the Government side have themselves spoken against this Conservative attack on low-and middle-income people.