

The Economy

Mr. Béchard: Yes, I do, and perhaps even more than the hon. member for Esquimalt-Saanich (Mr. Munro). Instead of a moderate economic growth like we have now, Canada witnessed in the 30's massive job losses and an economic downturn. On the other hand, this year in March, there were 330,000 workers more than at the same time period last year. Canadians only have to look around them to see the tremendous progress made in the last ten years. As I said earlier, not only has the real income of Canadians increased significantly, but the quality of health services, for instance, of transportation, the number of community centres, schools, universities, national and provincial parks as well as recreational centres have considerably increased.

For example, by striking off low income earners from the tax rolls, and by implementing an enlightened social policy, we managed to make poverty regress in the last ten years. According to reliable criteria, the percentage of Canadians below the poverty level dropped from 20 per cent in 1967 to 10 per cent today in 1978. This is a 50 per cent improvement and I think it is rather significant for an unsound economy, for an administration which is said to be inefficient. I think that the present administration is to be commended for increasing the standard of living of the Canadian people by 50 per cent.

The Canadian people who took advantage of the social justice measures implemented by the present government may ask themselves, and rightly so, what the Progressive Conservatives are thinking about when they propose to reduce the federal budget by \$2 billion. This morning, the hon. member for Roberval (Mr. Gauthier), and the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) stressed the fact that old age pensions should now be universal, which means they should be paid to all persons of 60. Well, meanwhile, the opposition, not the New Democratic Party, but the official opposition, criticizes the government for spending too much money and asks us to extend the old age pensions universally at the age of 60.

Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West): We never asked for that.

Mr. Béchard: Not you, the hon. member for Edmonton West (Mr. Lambert), but others. And the hon. member for Roberval (Mr. Gauthier) even said that pensions—and if I understood properly, he meant pensions plus guaranteed income supplements—should be paid to every one at the age of 60 without a means test. This is the Social Credit theory. So, Mr. Speaker, while we are asked to lower the eligible age, I do not know if you have figured out what would represent paying pensions at 60. Here on this side of the House, we would like every 60-year old to get it, and within ten years the eligible age will probably be lowered to 50, including us state pensioners at 50—

Mr. Lambert (Edmonton West): Who will work to pay for it?

[Mr. Munro (Esquimalt-Saanich).]

Mr. Béchard: Yes, who is going to work to pay for those pensions? So, Mr. Speaker, I consider that those proposals cannot be serious particularly when we are asked to cut expenses and taxes. As the sponsor of this motion suggested earlier, even if we would like everybody to receive that pension at the age of 60, we should not forget the taxpayers, and as my colleague from Edmonton West so ably put it, we should not forget those who are still working.

I also heard the two previous speakers, I refer to the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) and the hon. member for Roberval (Mr. Gauthier) say that the government party had promised the pension at 60 during the last election campaign. We have never promised such a thing. It may be possible that the pension at 60 for everyone has been promised in the heat of an election campaign, but this is not the platform I had to defend and put forward. And those who did it were probably not elected and are not in this House.

Mr. Speaker, before moving on, another thing that was said for the umpteenth time by the hon. member for Roberval is that the government party, and it will surprise also those of the official opposition, was opposed to the wage and price freeze during the last election campaign. Well, as in the case of those who promised the pension at 60 for everybody, we never objected to price controls, but we objected to a price freeze. We objected to the Canadian people being sent to freeze in the cold lands where the official opposition party, namely the Progressive Conservative party, wanted to lead us. We could not have objected to controls because we already had some in some areas. So I think it is not too honest for the opposition to play petty politics and show partisanship in this matter.

The progress made in this regard in the past ten years has allowed senior citizens, large families and the unemployed to keep their dignity despite the high rate of inflation and economic problems at the world level. In 1967, for example, the old age security pension was \$75 a month, and I would not be surprised to hear the official opposition say—in fact, they already said it—that the pension should be paid at the age of 60. However, bearing in mind that since the advent of social security measures, all the official opposition party has managed to offer Canadians is a meagre \$16 compared to the total amount of \$156.66 paid today. I wonder whether the Canadian people can take them seriously. Today—

An hon. Member: How much?

Mr. Béchard: \$156.66 less \$16. The difference is what the party led by the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and his predecessors have given Canadians. Today, those eligible for those benefits get a basic amount of \$156.66 a month, and a guaranteed income supplement of \$107.62 is paid to those who need it.