

My reason for coming into politics some 30 years ago was that I am a social worker. I worked with the Children's Aid Society in the city of Vancouver and also in correctional institutions. When I first started as a social worker, case loads were 78 children per worker. Now case loads average 250 to 300. We have not made progress, Mr. Speaker, we have lost ground. We were putting children as young as 12 years of age into prisons, known as training schools in this country. Mercifully, in the last 30 years some of that attitude has changed, but it has not changed on racial lines. There are still indigenous peoples in this country whose children are placed, on the basis of the fact they are indigenous people, far more readily than the rest of the population into child care in provinces right across this country.

• (1740)

Furthermore, when we talk about children's rights we must understand that they are part of families. Essentially the poverty end of those families is the single parent family. We can all make pious statements and platitudes about the necessity of caring for children, but the bottom line is sufficient money for a family to survive and provide the necessities of life for every child who should be given equal access to every necessity in this country. I do not blame the government for this situation, or the opposition, or our party. We talk about the necessity for these things, bringing a sense of unanimity to our concern for children. The facts is that there is only one body in this House that has the authority at this moment, delegated by the citizens of this country, to do something about it and it is that government over there.

It is not good enough to blame it on the Liberals. It is not good enough to say we hope to do better. What is good enough is to stand up and say that we, the Government of Canada, supported by the two opposition parties, intend to make right that which has for so long been wrong.

During my administration in British Columbia, I was attacked for being a social worker. I was attacked for being concerned about the rights of children. I was told that I was spending too much money on welfare. I will never apologize for upping the budgets for the care of children that we were responsible for as a government of the province of British Columbia.

Private Members' Business

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Barrett: I deeply regret that the succeeding government destroyed initiatives in the province of British Columbia parallel with some of the provinces, including the province of Quebec, that were innovative, new and daring in preventing problems with children rather than institutionalizing them and paying for the problems afterwards.

My colleague, the Member for Mission—Coquitlam, has made an outstanding statement here in this House, delineating through hard facts the passion and the anxiety of people in this country who do work with children every single day. We will not get another chance, perhaps, in the very short time of this parliament to discuss an issue that is as important as this in my opinion, and we do have a chance to vote on it today.

There are voiceless people who expect and hope and dream that somehow a good government will do something decent. This is a chance for all of us to participate in good government and in doing something decent, but it means backing it up with money.

My colleague spoke about the need for a hotline for children. The hotline is operating, Mr. Speaker. What is missing is the money to keep it going. I do not want to cast any aspersions on the way government chooses to spend, but surely a little bit from travel budgets could drift down to this kind of program. Surely a little bit from advertising budgets could drift down to children. Surely a little casual knocking off of some of the spendthrift attitudes of some of the ministers would trickle down to this problem.

Kids do not have a chance to speak. Kids do not have a chance to stand up in this House and ask for the things they want. Indigenous children who are the victims of inherent and incipient racism in this country do not have a chance to speak. We used to grab kids simply because they were indigenous kids and they were better placed in white homes than they were in the indigenous people's homes. Fortunately, that practice is almost gone in this country, but it still exists.

There is a need for standards to be set, as my colleague said. There should be basic minimums. The tools are there to do it under the Canada Assistance Plan. If this government really were concerned about children, it would say no money under the Canada Assistance Plan