

The Address—Mr. Lalonde

The fourth principle we have enunciated is integrally related to the third, namely that it must be recognized that provinces may wish to have the structures of social security varied in accordance with the social needs, income standards and the cost of living in different communities.

Canada is a very large country, and the problems which particular categories of individuals face in relation to the satisfaction of social needs are often quite different. These differences are rooted in the differing demographic, geographic, social and economic circumstances in which individuals find themselves. These variations in immediate environmental circumstances of individuals are of special interest and concern to provincial and municipal governments. On the other hand, we in this House have been especially concerned, as we must be, with national standards. Whether national standards can really be achieved by providing uniform levels of benefits is an issue of major concern to provincial administrations and, I believe, to the community as a whole. There is much evidence that suggests that uniform benefits do not necessarily achieve standardized effects on the relief of social needs.

We must admit, I think, that parliament, despite its excellent record of social legislation, has not yet found a way of providing for variations in payments that would assure fair and equitable results in all situations. This paradox of uniformity which fails to achieve equality has long troubled all who have been involved in the administration of social welfare. In recent years provincial governments have criticized a national security system which is not integrated at the level of the beneficiaries and which does not take sufficient account of provincial resources, goals and priorities. What appears to be needed, if we are to resolve the unavoidable problems of conflicting objectives and priorities within income security systems, are mechanisms by which the issues can be fully discussed with the provinces so that provincial legislatures may play a fuller role in determining what patterns and priorities should prevail in the total social security program.

• (1610)

This is not a matter, I might say, of weakening the federal presence in this area of policy. In so doing, we are not seeking solutions that would involve setting up the federal government as a mere tax collection agency for the provinces, because the federal government, indeed the federal parliament, would not support such an arrangement. Members of this House do not regard themselves as mere representatives of their respective provincial governments for they were elected directly by the citizens of this country to legislate for the whole country, and members of the House are authorized to speak for the population they represent every bit as much as are provincial legislators.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Lalonde: If the provinces are willing to be one-tenth as flexible as the federal government on this question, if they are prepared to show vis-à-vis our proposal a spirit of understanding similar to the one that we will show vis-à-vis theirs, if they are willing to admit that the con-

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cerns of the members of this House for the under privileged is just as great as that of members of provincial legislatures, then I am convinced that we can find some sensible way of adapting the programs to the needs of different areas and of achieving the integration of the programs which will mitigate if not wholly remove the anomalies which have been found to be unacceptable to so many Canadians.

[Translation]

The last principle derives from everything that has been stated so far. The review of the social security system in Canada has to be a joint achievement of the federal and provincial governments. A more rational system of social security could not be created eventually unless there is a reasonable measure of agreement between the government of Canada and the provincial governments. It is superfluous I hope to emphasize that the very nature of our country demands that our social security system be the result of consultations between the federal government and the provinces. Actually, it was the inefficacy of our efforts in that direction, as I mentioned earlier, that probably gave rise to the contradictions which appear today in the Canadian social security system, since Parliament and the legislative assemblies have a natural tendency to legislate on their own in fields that come under their constitutional jurisdictions.

So, if the provinces agree, it is our intention to re-examine with them the whole social security system. This is what we have done for the past few years within the Canadian government with respect to federal programs and I know that many provinces have done so as regards their own programs, but the time has come to review the whole social security system together and to work out a new approach involving the principles which we believe are generally supported by the population and the legislative bodies in Canada.

We must perform this review with due consideration for other federal and provincial measures. Many of these connected fields will obviously be involved. It is essential to keep in mind the impact of overall economic policies on economic incentives and job creation. We must also recognize the occasional need for special measures to create jobs in areas where unemployment is highest. Finding jobs for those who are able to work is indeed one of the cornerstones of the social security policy.

Therefore it is important to understand the effects of legislation on minimum wages at all levels of social security. This is not meant to say that social security levels must be tied in with minimum wages or vice versa. It is rather a matter of properly understanding that—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order. I regret that I must interrupt the hon. minister as I must inform him that his time has run out. Unless he is given unanimous consent, he cannot continue his speech. Is there unanimous consent?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Is it the wish of the House to allow the hon. minister to finish his speech?