

Federal Transfers to Provinces

We know very well, Mr. Speaker, that some provinces and their governments are not that keen on medicare and would not hesitate to cut programs. I think this points to the more serious effect of this decrease in funds. Over the past four years some provinces have cut back on the universality of medicare by introducing user fees and double billing.

When the task force looked at the situation they saw that many provinces had already pared the medicare system to the bone; that in fact there is no fat in the system. New Democrats, both in this and previous Parliaments, have consistently urged the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Miss Bégin) to force the provinces to maintain a program which will ensure all citizens access to medicare. We want to defend the principle of universality and the minister has consistently maintained she is doing exactly that. I suggest that the present bill, by withdrawing revenues from the provinces, will give them the very argument they want so that they can stand up and tell the minister that they are not able to afford universal standards and they have to introduce double billing and user fees, and maintain those practices already in effect.

This bill will have a similar effect on higher education. There will be cutbacks in programs, higher tuition fees, and education will become more the privilege of the few rather than the right of all who can benefit by it. The country will lose the benefit of critically trained minds at a time when these people are becoming more and more important to our economy. The result of these cutbacks will be that teachers are laid off. In effect, it will mean a gigantic waste of our most precious resources. As we look at those provinces which are already increasing tuition fees and cutting back, we see that these cutbacks will simply give the provinces a convenient out and the federal government will once more become a convenient whipping boy for the cutback mentality which is most detrimental to our program.

The federal government wants to have a greater degree of credit for its good works. I suppose that is understandable. The scriptures tell us that you should not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Certainly that is characteristic of the government in other respects, but when it comes to having any kind of program which gives benefits to people the federal government wants to shout it from the rooftops. I suggest that the federal government's attitude is—well, it is understandable. Regrettably it is like that of a parent neglecting legitimate responsibility for his or her own children in order to be involved in highly visible community affairs. Cutting back on funds for health and higher education in order to dole out money in highly visible programs is irresponsible.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would like to emphasize that Canadians do not want to see a continuation of this foolish squabble between the federal and provincial governments. They do not want to see it used as an excuse for cutting health and education programs. Canadians are not too much in favour of provincial governments being more powerful than the federal government. They want to see governments, both federal and provincial, which can work together in their

interest. With that in mind, I hope that the government will be very open to amendments when this bill goes to committee.

• (1630)

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Bud Cullen (Sarnia-Lambton): Mr. Speaker, during the last couple of days in which I have had the opportunity to listen to the debate, if I may say so, present company excepted, the tone of the debate has improved. I would compliment the hon. member who spoke previously, the Secretary of State (Mr. Regan), and particularly the member of Parliament for Kingston and the Islands (Miss MacDonald) who spoke yesterday. Although obviously I do not agree with the conclusions reached or some of the stances taken by hon. members opposite, it does seem to me that our debate has improved when some of the rhetoric has been taken out and we have had an opportunity to examine the facts. I think it was a mark of intellectual honesty on the part of the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands when she conceded in the debate yesterday that there were some provinces that were at fault as they were not maintaining their share of the post-secondary education dollar, and that they had a responsibility. She said that the people who elected those particular governments should see to it that they live up to their requirements under this particular act and to their responsibilities, chiefly for education, which is a jurisdiction they guard very jealously, as we all know.

The Secretary of State indicated what I thought to be an appropriate position, namely, that we should set aside the post-secondary education costs and look at what the provinces and the federal government are contributing. He said that we should leave the same formula in place. He felt that three caveats should be attached to that particular agreement, but the provinces could not agree. It seems to me that some of them may not want to agree because, as he pointed out very clearly, they have a greater responsibility to the people, particularly the young people that they are endeavouring to educate at the post-secondary level, than they have been fulfilling.

I remember a debate concerning whether we should maintain the old system where provinces had to account for each and every dollar that they spent on post-secondary education. The provinces said to the federal government, "Look, we have an elected Parliament as well; we are elected legislators; we have a responsibility to the electorate. It seems that we should be trusted, under the block-funding system, to use the money in an appropriate way". I believe it was primarily the party opposite, the New Democratic Party, which felt that that was inappropriate. The party was somewhat apprehensive that the provinces would take that particular action. As it turns out, it would seem that at least two provinces have been less than candid or proper in their application of the funding that they received from the federal government. When one looks at the statistics, and I do not think anyone really argues with the amount of moneys which have been transferred, one finds that the share that the federal government has paid for post-secondary education has gone up. However, in some of the