

image. But when we are dealing with issues as fundamental as the family, they say that they are very concerned about traditional values, Mr. Speaker. What kind of society do we want to build? Is it now more important to make sure that the Prime Minister looks good than to encourage the Canadian family? God knows, Mr. Speaker, that I am not a traditionalist! Yet, I would say that, when such basic values are involved, the politicians have no right to ignore them and to listen blindly to the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) and the Prime Minister and be party to an injustice. There is no partisanship in my comments, Mr. Speaker. This legislation is simply unacceptable, whether you are blue, red, green or orange, because there are families in every political party.

Mr. Speaker, I invite my colleagues to reflect on this because one day children will blame them for their attitude.

● (1550)

[English]

Mr. Ernie Epp (Thunder Bay-Nipigon): Mr. Speaker, I rise to join in this debate on the six-month hoist motion with respect to Bill C-70, An Act to amend the Family Allowance Act. I am very happy to take part in this debate because it is absolutely essential that we use every opportunity we can to have this Bill set back in time and if the Government will not withdraw it, kill it by that means.

In explaining why I believe it is so necessary for this Bill to be killed, I want to say a little about the beginning of this session of Parliament. In November of 1984, I remember being in this building for the Throne Speech and going to the Senate Chamber to listen to the Governor General read the Throne Speech. I found myself just outside the doors with many other Hon. Members, including Cabinet Ministers. We were all listening carefully. At one point I looked over and saw the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) who stood not more than six feet away. As the Governor General read the sentence, "That we must deal urgently with the deficit is beyond dispute", I glanced over at the Minister of Finance and raised my eyebrows because it is most certainly a matter which is open to dispute. He nodded his head portentously and I realized one of the realities about this Government. Whatever promises were given to the Canadian people in the summer of 1984, certain key people in this Government were convinced that the only way in which this country could advance toward prosperity was to take action on the deficit, no matter what.

As we walked back toward this Chamber, I seized the opportunity to meet the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp). As you will appreciate, Mr. Speaker, that had a special significance for me since I had not had the opportunity to shake his hand before and to chat briefly with him. We walked into the Chamber together and as we parted, I said, as one Epp to another, "Beware the cutters". It took a moment for that to register. The Minister laughed, as did the Tories around him. Ten months later, it is obvious, as it was obvious last spring, that that was no joke. In fact, the Minister of National Health and Welfare was going to be forced to yield to the "cutters" whatever his protestations.

Family Allowances Act

It became clear, in fact, on May 23 that Bay Street had triumphed over Main Street, that River Heights and Tuxedo were socking it to Steinbach and Ste Anne. As I travelled early in July through southern Manitoba and areas in which I grew up, I wondered to myself what the people of Provencher must think about their Member of Parliament, the Minister who spoke so bravely in months past about what the Government was going to do, and who was forced into ignominious retreat with respect to the deindexation of family allowances. After all, in January, he published a consultation paper in which he suggested—and I read from page 6 of this booklet, the third principle which would govern any reconsideration of family benefits and old age pensions, and I quote:

Any savings which may result from program changes will not be applied to a reduction of the deficit.

That was a bold and categorical statement. He had in fact invited Canadians and Members of Parliament to think with him about how we could ensure greater fairness in the distribution of benefits from these programs without disturbing the universality of family allowances and the Old Age Security pension.

It became all too sadly clear in his comments on Monday that he has been forced to yield this point. He went so far in fact as to straightforwardly present the savings which were going to be made in this area as a means of deficit reduction without any particular apology, nor any defence that I could see.

The Minister of National Health and Welfare said in his speech on Bill C-70, and I quote from *Hansard* on September 16, 1985 at page 6619:

In the Budget of May 23, 1985, the Government, through the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson), announced its intention to restructure the federal child benefit system to provide greater assistance to families with lower incomes while at the same time moving to bring our national debt under control. This Bill represents a first step toward meeting those dual objectives.

That seems to me a very candid concession. What had been rejected in January as an option, what had been denied in the statement of the principals who govern the actions of the Government, had been abandoned under the pressure of the Minister of Finance. The Minister of National Health and Welfare went on in his speech to say:

Many of those concerned about the problem of the debt and the deficit advised a more drastic course of action. Indeed, there are those who advocated that Government spending be reduced through the elimination of some of our social programs, and that includes family allowances.

That paragraph is an astonishing admission of the kinds of battles which appear to have been fought if not in caucus, then in Cabinet. There had been struggles to maintain something or other of the system. I suppose I should recognize that the Minister achieved something in maintaining what he has maintained, but there can be no doubt that the sacred trust of the summer of 1984 lay in tattered ruins when statements of that sort were being made on September 16.

● (1600)

What happens to the hopes of Government that remain? He is, after all, convinced. I am sure his colleagues will support