

Old Age Security Act

Most of the discussion on this matter on second reading in this House, and in committee, for understandable reasons, related to widows. The reason that has been the main subject is the complete unfairness, the complete inhumanity of this bill in that it would take away a pension in about 375 cases a month. A married partner who is getting his pension will lose it because that married partner is still below 65 and the one who was over 65 has died. That is the category about which most of the discussion has taken place.

• (1700)

There is also the sort of picture that I have seen so often, particularly during election campaigns, I must admit. I am thinking of men and women going into factories, into the work places in my constituency of Winnipeg North Centre, into the rolling mills, railway shops and meat packing plants. The question that is put to me most often in the mornings during election campaigns by employees who are 58, 59, 60, 61, and so on, is, "When are you going to get the pension age down to 60?" They ask this question because the rat race is becoming so hard for them. Therefore, I plead with this House to be concerned not only about widows, as we are, who are to get the "Lalonde treatment" under this bill, but to be concerned about workers in industry who find today's rat race so hard until 60 that it is very difficult for them to hold on. The day will come—it must—when pensions will be available at 60. I do not see the logic of the minister trying to tell us that he is not for that.

An hon. Member: Read what he said in committee.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): My hon. friend can make her own speech. The minister said last night in the committee that as long as he is Minister of National Health and Welfare there will be no extension of universal programs. That is what disturbed me most. Those words were uttered by a Liberal minister, by a member of the party with whom we have been fighting for universality for 30 or 40 years—a party which we thought we had educated. Now it wants to backtrack on that principle.

An hon. Member: Read the transcript.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Again, my hon. friend can make her speech later. I shall be glad to hear what she says about persons getting the pension at age 60. That social reform has to come. If the minister and the government felt they could not go all the way to pensions at age 60 for those who are out of the labour market, they could at least have found an in-between course, a course between the "spouses only" position and the position I have suggested. The government could have shown evidence of its intention to move in that direction—but the minister says the opposite: he says, "Don't count on me for any more universal programs. Look to me for some kind of guaranteed annual income program with an income test attached to it." Even today he stood in this House and proudly said he is rescuing spouses from having to go on welfare. At the same time, he is prepared to let spinsters, widows, bachelors and widowers in the same age bracket go on welfare, or social assistance as he prefers to call it.

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]

We went over this argument decades ago, Mr. Speaker, when I first came here and spoke from the back-row seats. When the pension was \$20 a month at age 70, with a means test, some of us tried to get rid of the means test. We argued against it but were told it could not be removed. Actually, in 1950 the whole question of what to do about old age pensions was referred to a special joint committee because it was becoming too hot an issue on the floor. The prime minister of that day, in the debate on the motion to refer the subject to the committee, expressed his opposition to the idea of paying pensions to everyone, but that committee was one of the best I have known because it was not given a cut-and-dried bill to which it had to say yes or no. It was given a subject to study and was told to come back with its recommendations.

That committee, to the surprise of the government, came back with the recommendation for old age security, for a universal pension at age 70 and the beginning of a pension at age 65, on a means test. I give the Liberal government of that day full credit for accepting that recommendation, particularly as the prime minister in the setting up of the committee did not like the idea of universality. Mr. Speaker, that remains the point in the history of social legislation of this country at which Canada took its best step forward. This country must now build on that initiative and move in the direction of the universal right to retire at age 60. I deplore as strongly as I can the fact that this bill moves so timidly in that direction.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): It is a baby step.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): It is just a baby step. It will cover, as I say, 80,000 or 85,000 out of the 750,000 Canadians who are in that age bracket between 60 and 65. Even so, I could have taken comfort from hoping that the situation will be better soon if it had not been for the minister's saying that he will not sponsor any more universal programs and that this bill, in his eyes, is not to be looked on as moving in the direction of providing pensions at age 60. Of course, if I were to believe what he said I would feel even more strongly than I do, but I do not happen to believe him. He may say that Bill C-62 is not moving in the direction of providing pensions at age 60, but I submit that it is. Just as surely as when we got old age assistance at age 65 with a means test between the ages of 65 and 70 it was only a matter of time until we would get a universal pension at age 65, so I believe this bill is the first break in the ice. This bill is the beginning. I predict that we will come to pensions across the board at age 60. Some day they will come across the board; certainly, they will come for those who are out of the labour market and, as I say, I strongly believe that that is what the government ought to be doing now.

I am saying two things, Mr. Speaker, and I say them with equal earnestness. Yes, we voted for this bill on second reading; we voted for its clauses in committee, and I am going to vote for it on third reading, because it is a start and because it will rescue between 80,000 and 85,000 persons from an intolerable situation. But my other reason for voting for this bill is this: it means that, at last, we shall begin to pay pensions under the Old Age Security Act to those below the age of 65. And, once these things start, even the Liberal government, even as stubborn a