

*Supply*

We all know that certain issues wax and wane in popularity in this country. We all know that it is our duty as politicians, as representatives of the people, as members of this historic House not to let ourselves be swayed merely by public fads and short-term aspirations. Child care and a national child care program is not a public fad. It is not a short-term aspiration. It is absolutely integral to employment equity for women and, in the long run, to over-all gender equality.

When Madam Justice Abella, as she is now, completed her landmark report on employment equity, one phrase became a clarion call for Canadian women and for those men, many of whom are here today, who support this philosophy that child care is the bridge to employment equity, absolutely and totally.

We all know that domestic responsibilities fall unfairly in proportion upon women. Certainly, every woman who sits in this House who is a mother knows that. It is the way of the world. What we are attempting to do is change the world to make the laws and the institutions somehow reflect the reality of all our lives.

It is incumbent upon us, it is a duty—I hesitate to use the words sacred trust but I will try them—to remember that our first responsibility in this Chamber is to the weaker, those who cannot protect themselves and those who are the disadvantaged in this society. Our responsibility is not as much to those who can protect themselves. Governments are here to protect those who are the weakest members.

• (1030)

It is clear in our modern society that the weakest members, those who have the least ability to protect themselves, are the economically disadvantaged and children. Who forms the largest segment of economically disadvantaged in this country? There is no prize for knowing the answer to this question. The answer is women.

If women cannot work outside the home, frequently the only survival for them is on the social assistance rolls. If there is not affordable, accessible, quality child care then they cannot work outside the home. It is as simple as that, particularly when their children are pre-schoolers.

There has been some sort of a groundswell response in this House, particularly on the government side, that child care is no longer important. Did I miss something?

Did people stop having babies? Are there fewer children in Canada than there used to be?

No, Mr. Speaker, I did not miss anything. As a matter of fact what I have not mentioned is the fact that a million Canadian children go to food banks. Why do they go to food banks? Because their parents cannot afford to give them the proper nutritional daily meals. Why can they not afford this? Because most of those one million children who go to food banks are in single-parent families headed by women and they are in single-parent families headed by women where child care is unavailable, where child care is inadequate or where child care is not existent and where mothers are unable to get the training they need, the jobs they need, the level of income they need to deliver for themselves and their children a decent way of life.

I am not suggesting that a national child care program is a total panacea and the answer to all our ills, but it would be one major giant step in the social development of this country. It would be one major liberating step for women who need to feel at least a modicum of security about where their children are so they can devote their considerable talents and energy during the working period to their jobs so that they can feed, clothe, and house their families. Does anybody really disagree with that? I do not think so. But do we have a national child care program? No, no we do not.

Canadian women will continue to face the same situation and the same dilemma, to leave their children in less than suitable situations and continue to work or to stay home to take care of them.

As I say, with the pre-school child it is not even a dilemma. It is simply the fact that if you cannot find child care you cannot go to work. It is equally troubling that a million children in this country are latch key. The children are old enough to go to school, but I do not think any one of us would think that those children are old enough to be left alone.

I recall in my other life dealing with the Children's Services Act in Nova Scotia and looking at the definition of a child in need of protection. A family court judge of great renown in Nova Scotia, who happened to be the author of the act, Judge Louis E. Moir, said to me that if you look at those definitions, there is not one of us nor one of our children who has not fallen under that definition at some time or other. In other words, in every family, in every situation there are lapses. He said that is the reason parents go around with a heavy load of guilt