

Social Policy

We then heard her voice. Otherwise she was interested in federal-provincial relations and the politics of federal and provincial governments, but not the politics of people.

The spouse's allowance program was introduced in the context of the first step toward a guaranteed annual income. In answer to a question the other day, I informed the House that a guaranteed annual income was rejected by the provinces at one of the last federal-provincial meetings concerned with the social security review. It was rejected for many different reasons. Some of these were explained at that time by my predecessor. They left us with one possibility of action, namely to explore tax related programs of income supplementation which by definition include a selectivity feature and no longer the characteristic of universality.

We brought about the spouse's allowance in recognition of the hardships faced by many older couples who no longer have a full salary but only the benefits of a single pension. By doing that, we were at the same time introducing another inequity. I do not recall the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands bringing that to the attention of hon. members when this House discussed that bill two and a half years ago.

The spouse's allowance was meant to answer the urgent problem of a couple. It has nothing to do with a principle. There is no principle behind the spouse's allowance. The spouse's allowance was designed to meet a practical situation, no more, no less. It is the first step toward helping those in need between 60 and 65. In saying that, I have just stated the purpose of this government. The purpose of this government, be it through a guaranteed annual income which we know will not take place or any other program of income supplementation that will come about sooner or later, and the sooner the better, is to help all those in need aged 60 to 65.

That is why, when it is recommended that we continue the spouse's allowance for those who receive it until they reach the age of 65, I have to oppose it. It multiplies the inequities for other people, often women who are not married. I refer, for example, to the eldest sister looking after the parents and left without any employment or possibility of employment because of her age, and having not yet reached age 65. This is a lifestyle of our society.

We have to respect those women who might have been married before the age of 60 but are no longer as a result of a divorce, death of her spouse, separation, or any other reason, and who did not fall under the bill proposing the spouse's allowance.

Moreover, we have to help all those aged 60 to 65. One of my colleagues on the government side will address the cost problem that is involved. If there were no cost problem, there would be no problem. It is very nice and easy to exploit the problems of people by trying to create expectations. However, the job of a politician is to choose between resources and priorities, trying to keep a balance and to satisfy the various needs of all the groups in Canada. That is the task of the government.

[Miss Bégin.]

Finding a solution for those in need between 60 and 64 is the second priority I have set for myself. The first is to find a solution for single parents or two-parent families with children who are among the working poor. They are not covered by existing provincial welfare programs because they are working, or they may be earning more than the minimum wage—but not really enough to live.

I set this group as my first priority after a great deal of inquiry among various groups in our society and officials working on these questions, those who are committed to social reform in our country. I attempted to determine the most vulnerable groups in Canada. There is not enough money to look after all groups. Which group should we help first; whose hardships and problems are the most critical? I was told that older people are in the second group. Later this afternoon one of my colleagues will describe the various programs to provide them with an allowance or pension, or exempting them through the tax system, making them slightly less vulnerable.

The second problem in these days of economic uncertainty is to reallocate moneys within the existing expenditures. We are working through the tax system to see what changes can be brought about in order to diminish the gap between the poorest in our society and those with the greatest share of its wealth.

[*Translation*]

As far as the spouse's allowance program is concerned, the real problem is this. We introduced this program two and a half years ago. We believe that with the support of parliament and public opinion, we could have made headway with the idea of a guaranteed annual income. Honesty compels me to say that the opposition has done everything to kill this idea of a guaranteed annual income for all Canadians. Since I was appointed minister six months ago, members of the opposition have been most conspicuous among those who, during the question period, have repeatedly worried Canadians by suggesting that the government was spending too much under the social programs, which of course is simply not true. Just now, the problem is this: 74,000 Old Age Pension recipients, most of them women, also receive the spouse's allowance.

● (1602)

[*English*]

I have just said that about 74,000 younger spouses receive these pension benefits, which averaged around \$130.60 a month during 1977. It is estimated that approximately 200 persons receiving spouse's allowance lose their benefits each month.

Some hon. Members: Shame!

Miss Bégin: That is a fact of life. Hon. gentlemen had better address it as such and find a solution rather than saying "Shame". This is based on legislation which was passed by all parties and none of them have the courage to say what should have been done to correct it.

Miss MacDonald: You were not in the committee.