

*Old Age Security Act*

supplement and the other spouse, being between the ages of sixty and sixty-five, would normally not be eligible for any benefits. The age criterion discriminated against the person living alone. The Liberal Government introduced the spouse's allowance. The Conservative Government has now decided to extend the spouse's allowance, part of our old age security programs, to any person in need and living alone, between the ages of sixty and sixty-four. I can only applaud this. However, the Government decided, and perhaps people who know more about the subject could check this—I think it is the first time in the history of this country that a Government has added a criterion based on marital status, a criterion that raises the question whether we should help people because the spouse died ten years ago, and she was married, or whether we should penalize people who are separated or people who have decided not to get married at all.

● (1730)

Mr. Speaker, the program had three criteria which were acceptable: age, living alone, and income. Now they are adding the widow and widower criteria, in other words: marital status. At the present time, to be eligible for the spouse's allowance, no marriage certificate is necessary. It is not necessary to have had a civil wedding. The law is humane. The two parties must sign a form and acknowledge that they had been living together for a year. That is it. The law does not intrude in people's private lives. But the amendment that the government wants to bring in might give rise to a class struggle. In my opinion, from a human point of view, some thought should be given to this matter. I do not want to put the blame on the government and suggest that it acted in bad faith. I know that it is a technicality and that any well-meaning person in a hurry is liable to forget the technical aspect and cause discrimination as in the present case.

Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, I think that this bill concerns all members and should be above political partisanship. In its present form, it will have an impact on other social measures, because it may be found in the future, regardless of the government in power, that according to statistics there are 100,000 aged married couples, while there is only enough money available to help half of them. It will be decided, since there are fewer women and more men, to help men first, then women. I suggest that we are on shaky grounds with that kind of criterion, because we have Conservatives in office now, but tomorrow it might be the NDP or the Liberals, and they might be tempted . . . We ought to think it over before adopting that criterion. I think we should be realistic.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has been bragging about consultation. Fine, I have nothing against consultation. But it now has an opportunity to show whether it consults only to dictate its own views, or if this consultation process is just another way of lending an ear to the big shots. Let us admit for a moment that the Conservative Members and the Minister think that the NDP or the Liberals do that for political

motives. Let us suppose that such is the case. I have here letters from various organizations in Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Sault Ste. Marie in Ontario, organizations concerned with elderly people and women. To this day, all those organizations are asking and urging the Government to make any person living alone eligible for the spouse's allowance.

I also have a copy of a letter, and I think that the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) bragged about being anxious to meet with various groups, he would rather wait before making any changes in other social programs about which we will be talking later on, family allowances and old age security pensions in general. I have a letter dated October 4th that was sent to the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp), on behalf of the Standing Committee on National Health and Welfare, by Mrs. Yvonne Raymond. This letter was sent after October 4th, and that committee was set up to advise the Minister, October 4th is later than September 4. On page 12, it says:

The Council recommends that the spouse's allowance be replaced by benefits determined following a means test and equivalent to the combined guaranteed income supplement and the old age security pension, for all low-income men and women, aged 60 to 64, whatever their marital status. That last detail is important: the spouse's allowance is extended to certain low-income spouses and certain widows and widowers aged 60 to 64, but not to many other Canadians in the same age group who are also in need, and this is creating difficulties. The Conservative Party's election promise to extend the spouse's allowance to all the 60,000 low-income widows and widowers aged 60 to 64 is a major step forward, but it will not help the 190,000 single men and women in the same age group who also need financial help. Of course we know that some reforms are too costly to be implemented overnight, but we are asking you to give them your special attention in coming years as they represent a fundamental part of an overall pension reform program.

Mr. Speaker, I have here a telex from the Quebec organization which fights for the rights of pre-retired and retired people, an organization with branches in all of our ridings and whose mission it is to fight for the rights of senior citizens. I think all Hon. Members will agree that senior citizens are not the noisiest people, or the most vocal protesters, and that they are not the group of citizens in our society that has the best structures needed to make himself heard, as opposed to the workers' unions struggling against industry, as opposed to the farmers who are a lot better organized and in a better position to come here to do what we call lobbying and get their points across.

I think everyone will admit that senior citizens need the parliamentary support of their representatives in this place.

Mr. Speaker, if we had wanted to play politics and make political gain, we would have let the Government pass this legislation and we would have blamed it for four years. The debate began long before the Government introduced its legislation because we knew quite well that, when the Government had made up its mind and decided to freeze certain funds, it would be impossible to make any changes. We in the Liberal Party said: This is not a partisan debate; it deals with