

Canada Child Care Act

Given the abominable wages for child care workers, it is a surprise that there are even as good child care centres in Canada as there are. I recall a few years ago, when my wife, a qualified child care worker, was interested in some part-time work at one of the better day care institutions in Ottawa. She made inquiries and found out she would be paid less than what our daughter, just out of high school, was receiving as a part-time clerk at the liquor store. It says something about our priorities as a nation when child care workers are relegated to the very bottom of the wage scale. This is not an argument against decent wages for clerks. It is an argument for recognizing the importance of someone with responsibility for child care.

The Minister recognized there was a problem last spring when he said he kind of miscalculated and there was going to be an extra \$1 billion in the pot. He said this was going to be used to improve wages for child care workers. Yet there is absolutely nothing in this legislation that sets any standards for wages. There is nothing that sets any objectives for anything whatever dealing with child care across the country.

We have some 1.8 million children whose parents are in the labour force and who do not have access to quality child care. We need to recognize that many of those who need child care are single parents or two-parent families where the one partner has a comparatively low wage job and they are unable to gain any kind of real toehold in the labour market. So they remain marginalized. The lack of adequate child care means that a great many parents, families and children are, therefore, condemned to poverty. There is a direct relationship. By not having a decent child care program in place, the Government is continuing to condemn a large number of Canadian children to poverty who would not be in poverty if we had a decent program.

• (1550)

The Tory policy will create fewer child care spaces over the next seven years than the present system, inadequate as that present system is. Today, there are approximately 240,000 child care spaces. The Tories plan to add 200,000 spaces by the year 1995. Under the present situation, inadequate as it is as I have said, the number of spaces doubles every five years, so we would have reached that doubling by the year 1993. The Tories have planned to add an extra 200,000 spaces by the year 1995. This Bill puts a ceiling on the number of new spaces which the federal Government is prepared to support. It makes funding available to the provinces but with no national objectives to ensure that money is used to provide quality accessible care.

There has been some debate today about the question of witnesses coming before the committee. We say that the whole committee process taking only 2.5 days to hear witnesses neglected whole areas of Canada. Nobody was heard from the Atlantic provinces. There were only two witnesses from east of the Ottawa River. That is a travesty of what our committee process is supposed to be about. The Hon. Member for

Niagara Falls (Mr. Nicholson) said that the New Democratic Party is trying to have it both ways, that the New Democrats had been demanding action following the earlier task force. He is quite right. We have been demanding action. Then he said that we wanted to study the Bill after it was tabled. Of course, when such an inadequate Bill was tabled, it was important that witnesses should appear who could point out the inadequacies with the hope the Government would listen.

Unfortunately, the Government did not choose to listen but regarded the committee process as simply a stage that had to be gone through. Instead of having credible witnesses on the Government side, if the Government had any who would have been prepared to reason with the committee—the committee process is to hear witnesses and to try to reach some balance as to what is needed—the Government simply said: “We are not even interested in talking with Opposition Members about what our position is. You can call a few witnesses of your own. We will not listen to them nor will we change anything. We will ram this legislation through because we want it in place for the election”. That is a travesty. In committee there is supposed to be an opportunity for both sides to be heard and for committee members to be able to weigh and reason among themselves.

Over the last eight years of good committees in this House of Commons, both under the present Government and under the previous Liberal Government, it has been my experience that that is what committees have done. But when you have a Government that says it does not matter what witnesses say, that it will simply follow its own legislation and ideological bent, telling the Opposition to call witnesses and that the Government will call none, that is a travesty, Madam Speaker.

When New Democrats look at child care needs across Canada, we see seven key principles which have to be established. First, a program for child care should be comprehensive. It should include a broad range of services to serve infants, pre-schoolers, school-age children and those with special needs. Second, quality should be established. Services should be licensed and regulated and should incorporate the best current information about early childhood development. This is an area where scholars are working and developing their knowledge all the time. We need people who have been trained in this area rather than simply saying that so-and-so has always liked children, and why shouldn't he or she have the opportunity to have some kind of day care facility. We need people who have been trained in what early childhood development is all about.

Third, the program should be affordable. Cost should not be a barrier to access. Over a period of time, parental fees should diminish until they are ultimately phased out. There is absolutely nothing in Bill C-144 to make that possible. Fourth, day care facilities should be accessible. Services should be universally accessible to all families seeking care regardless of income, employment status and geographic location. Fifth, day