

Let there be no equivocation about where we stand. Members of this party and all members of the House will stand up and be counted when it comes to standing up for the rights of Canadians to freedom and justice. This is what this bill is for. I am disappointed with the government because back in December 1971 the then minister of national revenue and the then minister of national health and welfare put out a joint news release which stated that in the next session of the House legislation would be brought in to exempt from the plan people such as the Old Order Mennonites, who for reasons of conscience are not allowed to contribute to the Canada Pension Plan.

However, this promise was not kept. The next session of the House came and went. Throughout this session, since my election, I have been trying to get some assurance from the government that the bill would be introduced and passed. They refused to do so before tax filing time came this year. Then because the government was bringing in new legislation they promised not to enforce the old legislation, but it made the position of the Old Order Mennonites and groups like them very tenuous. It was certainly a cause of great concern to each of them.

The reason there is concern on the part of the Old Order Mennonites with respect to the Canada Pension Plan is that their religion expressly forbids them from taking part in any insurance scheme whatsoever. They have no objection to participating through taxes in helping other groups. While their religion does not allow them to participate in welfare schemes in terms of taking benefits—they do not take benefits from the family assistance plan, old age pensions, or workmen's compensation—they do not object to contributing and pulling their fair share of the load when it comes to helping other members outside their community.

If the Canada Pension Plan were to have been financed out of the tax revenue, there would have been no objection on the part of the Mennonites in my constituency. The problem that existed here was the special provision whereby the Canada Pension Plan was designed as an insurance scheme and the contributions were kept separate from the general tax revenue. The Mennonites were required to make full contributions to the Canada Pension Plan and the government acted to restrict their religious freedom by going before the Ontario marketing board and seizing their grain cheques. That is a shocking affront to their rights as Canadians. Fortunately this bill will change that and the procedure will not be carried out another year.

The argument has been made that, because the provinces are able to borrow from tax revenues which come into the federal coffers for the Canada Pension Plan, they are able to finance other schemes in the provinces of which Mennonites and other groups like them are able to take advantage, and that therefore the Mennonites would not be pulling their share of the load. Such an argument is specious because it is clear that payments made by Mennonites and other such groups to the government for welfare and other benefits, in return for which they do not collect benefits, are much greater than any potential loss from this fund. If a person who pays into the scheme and takes money out is a good Canadian, at least the people who pay in so much more money than they take out of any scheme are much better Canadians than the rest of us.

Canada Pension Plan

The argument has been made that because the Canada Pension Plan was designed as a universal scheme, no group should be allowed to opt out. Of course, this does not make sense. I cannot accept that, on the basis of bureaucratic niceties, we should deny people the right to religious freedom, which is what we would be doing if we refused to make this amendment. If there is a need to increase the amount of the fund—and I believe there is—to be made available to provinces and municipalities for capital construction purposes, to build roads and so on, let us bring in legislation that will do that. Let us start decentralizing the funding of programs. But let us not try to achieve our aims by depriving people of their religious freedom; there is no excuse for that.

I am a member of my party because I believe in the ability of all people to live in freedom and dignity, unburdened by bureaucracy and not threatened by insensitive and intolerant people who would refuse each of us the right to be ourselves. I believe that is a fundamental right that each of us should share. I support this legislation because I know that if the freedom of religion of a small sect such as the Old Order Mennonites is threatened, it may not be too long before the freedom of religion of other members of the House, myself included, might be threatened. This is surely something which we cannot allow in a democracy.

I will sit down now to give the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) an opportunity to give his party's position on this, but let me make the plea to members of the House that there be no doubt about where members of the House stand when it comes to justice and equity and freedom of religion. Let us support this legislation.

● (1540)

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, the President of the Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen) was correct as far as he went in indicating the purpose of this bill. Indeed, its main purpose is to make the provision which has been debated, pro and con, by the last two speakers, namely, that members of certain clearly defined religious groups be exempted from payment into and benefits out of the Canada Pension Plan. I shall come back to that in a moment or two.

The bill does one other major thing, and it has several minor points in it as well. The minor points are technical details that are improved because of experience with the act. The other major point in the bill is that it makes provision for the legal expenses of a claimant to be paid under certain circumstances.

As the legislation now stands, if a contributor to the Canada Pension Plan applies for a pension and has his application refused, he can take his case to a review committee. If that review committee makes a ruling in his favour, it is still possible for the minister to appeal that ruling to the Pension Appeals Board. In that case the contributor is faced with additional legal expenses, and one of the major purposes of this bill is to provide that, in a case where the minister has appealed against a decision favourable to the claimant, the claimant's legal expenses will be paid. That is certainly a proper provision which I am sure everyone will support.