

In a different context the Minister of National Health and Welfare now says without any apparent embarrassment, and I quote:

We must look at the question of overall priorities. These priorities have not yet been established. The relative social priorities of benefits for pensioners' spouses or for widows and single women in the same age group, or for disabled people of any age, or for families struggling to raise young children on limited incomes, ought to be closely examined.

And once more the government is confirming our own way of thinking when we said, during the last election campaign, that a national conference on Canadian priorities should be convened. Without governing the country we knew it but withdrawn in their ivory tower, they took years to learn it and recognize it.

It is true that in April a federal-provincial conference will take place on the overall social security policy. But this should not prevent the present Minister of National Health and Welfare from opening avenues and from adopting a progressive attitude.

• (1250)

[English]

I found very curious, Mr. Speaker, the two-fisted approach of the minister in introducing this bill yesterday. With one hand open wide, he spoke of how much the increase was and how important it would be to the senior citizens across Canada. At the same time, with the other hand the minister was very close fisted with regard to further progress in old age security planning in the future.

I find it very difficult to understand how a minister who spends a full 30 per cent of his speech extolling his party's commitment to progress in the social legislation field over the years can then spend almost as much time in his speech erecting obstacles to further progress in the field dealt with by the bill. His concentration on the administrative and fiscal arguments against progressing to the point where 60 would be the age of eligibility for a pension seems both overdone and somewhat reactionary. There were no fiscal impediments to mismanagement on the part of the government with regard to the *Bras d'Or* or the *Bonaventure*. There are no fiscal impediments to wild election promises, unsubstantiated by main or supplementary estimates. But when it comes to Canada's senior citizens, there always appear to be some fiscal impediments. That is the type of low priority that the government and this minister obviously attach to this area of social legislation. While this bill may be all right as far as it goes, I believe that it is essential that this parliament be on record as saying that in this area of social legislation we really can do better.

What the minister should have done, and indeed what thousands of senior citizens had a right to expect, was for him to make, along with this bill, a firm commitment to explore a reduction of the eligibility age to 60. We know very clearly the employment difficulties that those in their late fifties with no direct skill have. We know what type of employment insecurity the entire population endures, let alone the 50 to 65 group. While these social concerns should have been enough to encourage the minister to embark upon some commitment, surely the one rationale for this approach should be purely humanitarian.

Old Age Security Act

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker: I am sorry I must interrupt the hon. member, but it being one o'clock, I do now leave the chair until two o'clock.

At 1 p.m., the House took recess.

[English]

AFTER RECESS

The House resumed at 2 p.m.

Mr. Wagner: Mr. Speaker, before the recess, I was trying to encourage the minister to adopt a humanitarian approach to this whole field of old age pensions. There are many who are suggesting, and quite frankly I happen to agree, that the old measures of a society's success, such as the gross national product and the balance of payments, are not all that relevant to the society in which most of us live. Many are saying that a society's success relates to its ability in terms of a meaningful social audit to measure up to standards of human dignity and social equality. It is in terms of this audit that we remain in the red, with so many just into or passed their prime. We have a responsibility to at least commit ourselves to balancing this particular section of the social ledger through progressive policies aimed at reducing the years of hardship for so many Canadians. It is the area of commitment to future policies that the minister has left far too much unsaid, and he has allied himself with those reactionary arguments that have always plagued societies seeking some very real social progress.

The area of social legislation is not one that can be attacked in short spurts either before risky elections or after inconclusive ones. This is an area of national policy that must have top priority at all times. The area of old age security legislation must not be closed off for a year or even a day. No bill must be allowed to be viewed as the end of any evolution. If Canadians are to have an integrated and comprehensive social legislative package to live with, its continued evaluation and re-examination must be looked at as a major priority for all levels of government.

I truly regret that the minister chose in yesterday's speech to cut off the question of lowering the eligibility. For him and for his government, this is a retrograde step. I think that while it is perhaps parliamentary form for the Liberal government to underestimate its opposition in this House and in the country, it is poor form for that same government to underestimate the Canadian people, their compassion and understanding.

Like most members, I come from a riding where concern for the aged is not confined to the aged. I come from a riding where people care more about each other and want to contribute to each other's welfare. This country, in my view, is made up of that type of person. This government has a responsibility to reflect that concern. This government is not being representative when it closes doors, as did the minister yesterday, to further progress in the old age security field. Indeed, it is doing a great disservice to those who look to government for leadership in the social field.