

The disabled people who came here today made three requests. One is that this legislation be applicable to federal Government Departments. The second is that the penalties in the legislation be made broader and more all-encompassing. The third is that "reasonable accommodation" be defined in the legislation. I do not think it is asking too much to implement that.

In the few minutes remaining, I would like to read to you, Mr. Speaker, an excerpt from the testimony given before the legislative committee on Bill C-62 by Beryl Potter, the lady who interjected from the galleries today. She was one of the most articulate spokespeople for disabled Canadians and really objected to the answer the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Miss MacDonald) gave to my question in the House. She appeared as a witness before a special committee on Bill C-62, and I would like to read to the House what she says about "reasonable accommodation", which is as follows:

Reasonable accommodation is essential to job accessibility for disabled people.

This is recognized by the Government in s. 2, the purpose section, which states "that employment equity means more than treating persons in the same way, but also requires special measures and the accommodation of differences." Accommodation means the reasonable adaptation of the workplace or the job description to accommodate the special needs of a qualified disabled person. Let me give you an example of reasonable accommodation:

Let's suppose I am hard of hearing and wear a hearing aid. I am well trained as a secretary but will not be able to use a telephone unless it is compatible with hearing aid equipment. If I apply for a secretarial job and am qualified in all ways except for my limitation in using the phone, the employer could be required as part of employment equity to make his telephone hearing aid compatible. All this requires is the insertion of a small, very inexpensive coil into Bell Canada receivers. But many employers do not know this and without a requirement to provide this accommodation, might not be willing to hire me because of my disability.

Reasonable accommodation is so crucial to employment equity for disabled people, that it should be adequately outlined in legislation. Section 4(b) make reference to reasonable accommodation but does not define it.

We recommend that reasonable accommodation be spelled out in the Bill to include provision for physical accessibility, assistive devices, flexible job design and modification, and human support services. Since reasonable accommodation is so central to employment equity for disabled people and since disabled people themselves and others can assist in devising creative approaches to accommodation, we recommend that employers be required to have in their workplaces employment equity committees consisting of representatives of management, labour and the designated groups.

That was an excerpt from the testimony of Mrs. Beryl Potter of Scarborough and the Scarborough Action Awareness Group of the Organization of Disabled Canadians. I think she summarized very well why Parliament should include a definition of reasonable accommodation in the employment equity Bill.

This is not an economic matter that should be dividing socialist, Liberal and Conservative Members of Parliament. This is an issue that deals with human hurt and human misery. Surely to goodness we should be united on this kind of question. It does not matter whether one is a neo-Conservative like my friend from Alberta, a social democrat like me, or a Liberal like others. This is the type of thing that should unite us.

Employment Equity

I appeal to my Conservative friends to listen to those disabled Canadians who came here today in their wheelchairs or with their crutches. They came here at considerable expense. Many of them had to use specially designed vehicles and buses for the handicapped to get here. Some of them had to come here last night and stay at very expensive hotels because some of the hotels in Ottawa with more reasonable rates do not have reasonable accommodation for wheelchairs. I was not aware of that until it was pointed out to me outside of the Parliament Buildings this afternoon.

● (1650)

Most of us are very fortunate in this House not to be disabled. We do not realize these kinds of problems, but when you start talking and dealing with these people, you start to understand why it is necessary to say in the law of Canada that we have to have a definition of "reasonable accommodation", otherwise those of us in the vast majority will tend to ignore their problems, hoping that the problems will go away. The problems will not go away because that is the way they are. The handicapped are asking us to listen. I plead with my Conservative colleagues to do that.

Mr. Gerry Weiner (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Employment and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, the Hon. Member is right. This is not an issue that divides us. We are together in our understanding of what the Member is attempting to do. All of us want to be as helpful and as useful as we can. My colleague, the Hon. Member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine East (Mr. Allmand), says the purpose of the phrase "without restriction" is to give guidance. That, I will say, will be done through the guidelines and the regulations.

All Members of the House accept the principle of reasonable accommodation. The only question is, what is the most effective place for this definition? For reasons discussed, we believe the best place is not in the legislation itself. I know that we had a discussion on whether or not it is limited.

Certain target groups are already left out in what has been placed before us, but that is not what we are trying to do. We understand the process. I think we can do all that with the guidelines. We have an evolving process here. We have a definition that through technology we will undergo rapid change. The Bill itself, while cast in a little more firmness, can have guidelines that may have to change from time to time. I think all of that is understood. We know those are essential elements in implementing any employment equity program.

There are measures that have to be put into effect, remedial measures, special training programs, support measures, things like career counselling, internships, day care and flex time. All of these things will be essential in carrying out employment equity programs. Those are still matters of process. Philosophically we can spend days, weeks and months going through a definition. For practicality, we want the Bill and we want the Bill now. A lot of those matters can be tackled in the guidelines and in the regulations.