

Senior Citizens

around such matters as determining that certain programs for the aged require more financial support, upon occasion developing a proposal for a demonstration project, and issuing an annual report. Although these reports provide evidence of the concern of the council about the problems of older people in the United States, and of the time and attention devoted to discussion of them, they unfortunately cannot be said to reflect a policy focus for the government's work in aging.

The U.S. federal government agency which receives the most attention from Canadians is the administration on aging. It has gone through many changes; from time to time efforts have been made to strengthen it. Its actual accomplishments have been limited because it has been difficult for it to assume a role of leadership. Its national visibility, prestige and power within government are limited. Its budget is relatively small in comparison with those of other activities of importance to the aging in the U.S.A. Preoccupation has centred around administering its grants-in-aid program to the states, its research and demonstration programs and the like. Staff resources devoted to government-wide activities and issues of over-all federal government policy on aging are not significantly emphasized.

I have a purpose, Mr. Speaker, in making these few brief comments about developments on aging in the U.S. federal government because these are so frequently referred to in Canada. That many departments of government in the U.S.A. have staff devoting time to aging, and that many commissions, task forces and the like are all operating on a continuing basis, is a fact. But recommendations for something else that will be effective are still being made. Some are acted upon, resulting in the emergence of another new structure; those already in place continue and the new creation establishes but another layer. To date we have avoided such proliferation in Canada.

I am not saying that some specific structure charged with responsibility in aging at the federal level should not be established. I am saying that before it is established we should define its role, its goals, and establish the appropriate authority, statutory or otherwise, under which it should operate. It should not duplicate the work on aging presently being done within several departments of government. Presumably it might serve to co-ordinate this work. Certainly it cannot assume, even by implication, the responsibilities which belong to other jurisdictions in Canada.

● (1652)

No one denies that there is much to be done. No one denies the challenge which faces us as such a large segment of our population continues to age. However, I do not believe that a senior citizens commission such as is proposed in Bill C-218 would resolve the tasks which are required to identify the needs of our senior citizens in this country.

Mr. Perrin Beatty (Wellington-Grey-Dufferin-Waterloo): Mr. Speaker, I would like to indicate at the outset that I am pleased to support the proposal that has been made by my colleague from York-Sunbury (Mr. Howie) which would create a commission. This commission would be unpaid and it would not cost the taxpayer a penny. It would make recom-

mendations and study the problems of senior citizens and suggest to the government what should be done to come to grips with those problems.

An hon. Member: That would embarrass them.

Mr. Beatty: I am disappointed, Mr. Speaker, to learn that the government is in opposition to this proposal. It is a matter, as I have said, which would not cost the government a penny. The time has come to recognize that priority has to be given to the problems of senior citizens in Canada. They should not be forced to wait until election time, when the government will rediscover senior citizens and their problems. Action should be taken now.

In a very few minutes it will be evident whether this bill will go forward or whether the government will talk the legislation out and refuse to allow it to come to a vote. If the government has the courage and the desire to allow this bill to go ahead, two priority items should be dealt with by this commission. The first one is the question for spouse's allowance for widows.

Nothing during the time I have spent here has been more disgraceful or more disconcerting than the treatment accorded to widows in Canada between the ages of 60 and 65 who are heartlessly cut off by this government from their allowances. I am sure that every government member has received telephone calls, as I have, from widows between the ages of 60 and 65, as well as letters from them, respecting spouses' allowances, finding that upon the death of the senior pensioner those spouses allowances are cut off cold.

Most of these calls and letters come anonymously because the pensioners concerned are so ashamed. Their dignity and pride is attacked, and they are so frightened they will not identify themselves. The government has done nothing to alleviate this problem. The government should recognize that under the spouses' program in Ontario it is possible for the neediest in our society, the neediest pensioners, to receive over \$500 a month. However, upon the death of a pensioner over 65 years of age whose spouse has yet to reach that age, that \$500 is cut off cold. They just receive a letter from the government and they are told they are to fend for themselves. The widows are told to go out and get a job. This government just does not care.

On March 29 the then minister of health and welfare told the health committee of parliament that the savings made by the government in cutting off widows whose spouses have died amount to only \$4 million a year. If the benefits were to be continued for these spouses the cost to the average Canadian would be 25 cents per year. What cruelty! The government is not even prepared to do that. Some 200 widows receive letters from the government informing them that their spouse's allowance will be cut off because they have had the misfortune to be married to someone who has died before reaching the age of 65.

I suspect the government will rediscover the spouses and the widows in Canada when election time comes. They will discover that they can find that \$4 million. But action should be taken today. It should have been taken long ago to provide