

Old Age Security Act

Mr. Speaker, I am sure that our religious orders must be asking themselves some very serious questions about this Government. I see the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Côté). I know he has nuns in his riding to whom he will be hard put to explain the fact that since they are not widowed, they will not be eligible for the allowance when they turn 60.

I would also like to mention the case of people who are divorced. What does the Progressive Conservative Party have against people who had an unfortunate experience in their lives and who have had to suffer the heartbreak of a divorce? Mr. Speaker, do we, as the Parliament of this country, have the right to discriminate against those who are divorced? Does our society not accept divorce, unfortunate though it may be? We should recognize the needs of these people. I realize the same applies to people who are separated. I fail to understand why this Government has decided to commit itself to meeting the needs of widows and widowers. I agree that widows and widowers have needs, but certainly not any more so than people who are single, separated or divorced.

Mr. Speaker, does poverty have a marital status? What this Government is trying to do is to treat marital status as a basis for discrimination, and I am sure there are associations that will protest and take this decision before the courts. In Section 13, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms gives all Canadians the right to equality. I am positive that in the months and years to come, many cases will be registered with the courts.

When I see the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) who sat with me on the Committee on the Constitution and made some excellent speeches against discrimination and now, the first Bill tabled by the Minister in the House contains all the elements that contravene Section 13 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Mr. Speaker, I think that in the weeks to come, Government Members will be put under pressure by those who are separated, divorced and single, and members of religious orders, and they will realize that the Bill is discriminatory and lacks the justification referred to in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Section 1, and I quote:

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

● (1150)

And to this day, after all the speeches we have heard from the Government side, no one has been able to show that that kind of discrimination is justified except by harking back to the deficit problem.

Mr. Speaker, there is no court of law where the point made by the Hon. Member for Charlevoix would hold. No court of law would tell him: Yes, in view of the deficit problem you may get away with discrimination. And this is the question in my view that the Government Members should ask themselves.

They should go to their constituencies and ask those who are single, divorced or separated: Do you think this is fair?

Everybody will tell them: No, Mr. Speaker. We all agree that if the Government had been faced with a financial problem, certainly the solution would have been to progressively lower the age of entitlement. They could have said age 64 or 63, but the same should apply to everyone.

And this is what I am concerned about in this Government's philosophy: they selected one group, without any economic justification unless there is one in the briefing books of the Hon. Member for Brome-Missisquoi (Mrs. Bertrand). But I am anxious to hear her. She took part in televised debates, but then she was unable to substantiate her point.

That is the question that must absolutely be asked here, today. And I hope the Hon. Members opposite will be asking it too. I know, Mr. Speaker, that being a distinguished lawyer you have asked yourself that question, and surely you are in doubt as to whether in these circumstances discrimination is acceptable.

It is my hope, Mr. Speaker, that in upcoming minutes, upcoming hours, upcoming days, and hopefully in upcoming weeks, when this legislation is discussed, Conservative Members will manage to convince the public and the House that they have a right to resort to discrimination. It is against the spirit and the letter of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. And certainly the courts will tell you that, Mr. Member of Parliament for Charlevoix. I am sure that within the next few months, this will be proven in court.

Now they say: Yes, that will cost millions and millions of dollars. I hope that Hon. Members can convince the Minister of Defence not to spend \$54 million on uniforms. Speaking of choice for the Government, I feel it is more important to help our seniors than to change the colour of military uniforms. Mr. Speaker, our military personnel already have all the clothing they need but our senior citizens are hard put to buy clothes. And we know how destitute our citizens aged 60 to 65 and living alone can be. This is why the Government cannot hope to get off the hook by saying: "We have no more money." They have money for new uniforms, for new cars. They want to buy guns and what have you, ships galore, and of course everything the Americans wish to sell them. But when it comes to our older people, they say: "We have no money!"

This is an argument the Opposition will not buy. We welcome the first parts of Bill C-26, but we know it is a piece of legislation that was hastily put up together. Of necessity they could not think of everything. The Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp), who certainly has an innate sense of justice, certainly will reconsider his position at the urging of his Parliamentary Secretary who knows the real people, who certainly can tell him that in her constituency religious orders are not at all happy with that. She can tell him that in her constituency, separated or divorced people should