

Blindness Allowance

year, times the number of legally blind, it would cost the taxpayers in the neighbourhood of \$72 million per year.

It has often been said that you can measure the compassion and the justice of a great civilization or nation by the way it treats its handicapped and socially deprived. It seems to me this is a small price to pay. As one Canadian taxpayer, I not only encourage the government to go forward with this program but I am prepared to carry a greater tax burden through my income tax and that of my wife, who has a full-time job, in order to establish this kind of financial compensation to the handicapped blind. Surely the government can afford this amount of money out of the \$42 billion it spends per year. This is a small amount in comparison to the total.

To again use statistics from this article in "Vision Canada", less than 25 per cent of the legally blind in this country work. This means that the bulk, 75 per cent, are living for the most part from the public purse in terms of welfare. This is indeed degrading. This is not the result of lack of will to work, or industry on their part; it is because they cannot compete for many jobs because of their handicap.

I stand in this chamber today speaking on behalf of those who do not have sight. As I am sure do most members of this chamber, I place a great premium and value on my sight. I represent the 30,000 Canadians who are legally blind. I do not beg for charity; I reason for justice.

Mr. C. Douglas (Bruce-Grey): Mr. Speaker, I wish to congratulate the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Whiteway) on his presentation. Like that hon. member, and I am sure every other member of this House, I, too, place a great deal of value and store on my sight. I thank the hon. member for bringing this matter before us for consideration at this time. The hon. member's suggestion is that the government should consider the advisability of establishing a universal cost of blindness allowance for the legally blind of not less than \$200 a month which would, of course, be indexed to the consumer price index annually. This indexing would, over the years, bring the cost much higher than when it started.

I should like to note, if I may, certainly not to detract from the hon. member's suggestion or because I do not have a great deal of sympathy for what he proposes, a number of arguments which I feel should be put forth in considering this most commendable proposition. These are arguments that would certainly come forward during the course of a study of this kind and arguments that a government, no matter what government at the time, would have to take into serious consideration. Of course, \$200 per month indexed to the consumer price index annually, regardless of income or need, has also been stipulated. The government does not at this time foresee such an allowance being paid for this or any other segment of the Canadian population in the near future.

This is not to say that the government, myself and other members of this House, are not sympathetic to the plight of blind people. Hon. members can be assured that the government recognizes the severity of the handicap imposed by blindness and that it also recognizes that the problem is

[Mr. Whiteway.]

particularly serious when the disability is present from early childhood and has prevented persons from obtaining an education which would permit them to compete in today's labour market, a highly competitive labour market at the best of times. In this respect the blind certainly are among a large number of people who are at a similar disadvantage because of a variety of physical and social handicaps.

I think it is a little unfair to propose a \$200 monthly allotment for the blind and not take into consideration those persons who, through no fault of their own, have been handicapped in other ways. I am thinking of the paraplegics, multiple amputees or the person who has suffered, through no fault of his own, mental retardation from the time of birth. These people have to be taken into consideration, as well, by anyone who considers the extension of a universal program to all registered blind persons in Canada. Limiting the program to those people would not be fair without extending the same benefits to the other disabled segments of our society.

Secondly, while the hon. member for Selkirk said this would be costly, we must admit that it would be very costly because, as has been suggested, there are more than 30,000 blind people in this country. I think the hon. member would find that this number could be extended to 50,000, and at \$200 a month that would come to \$100 million per year as an extra expense to the government purse. In 1975 there were 30,000 blind persons in Canada registered with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. It is estimated by the CNIB that there may be in excess of 50,000 who could be certified under the act. As I suggested, the cost of a universal allowance of \$200 a month would amount to about \$100 million annually, and indexing would increase that amount considerably in the future. As the hon. member has said, this is a large amount.

In examining this problem, the government must be concerned primarily with measures which would benefit needy persons as a whole rather than certain categories within that group. Consistent with this philosophy, the Canada Assistance Plan was introduced in 1966, affording the provinces greater flexibility in providing for assistance to all persons, not only to the blind but to those with other handicaps. Therefore, most Canadian provinces have discontinued their participation in both the disabled persons' allowance and the blind persons' allowance programs in favour of the broader approach afforded under the Canada Assistance Plan.

Until a new system is implemented, the Canada Assistance Plan will continue to operate. Under this plan persons who are in need can apply for assistance through the general assistance program in each province, and if they are blind they can receive additional assistance because of that impairment. Under the plan the federal government shares in the cost of aid granted to the people in need. However, it is the provincial governments which administer these programs, and as such the criteria for eligibility are set at various levels. Let me point out that the general assistance plan has been in effect across Canada in all provinces. As a matter of fact, a single, blind person in Newfoundland would receive \$250 a month, while a couple would receive \$398. In Prince Edward Island, a single