

Private Members' Business

absolutely important for Canadians. Here are some of the highlights from it.

Every child has the inherent right to life and the state shall ensure maximum child survival and development. Children shall not be separated from their parents unless competent authorities are there for their own well-being. Parents have the primary responsibility for the child's upbringing, but the state shall provide them with appropriate assistance and develop child care institutions. The state shall protect children from physical or mental harm and neglect. Disabled children shall have the right to special treatment, education and care. The state shall ensure health care is provided to all children. Primary education shall be free and compulsory as early as possible. Discipline shall respect the child's dignity. Children should have time to rest and play and equal opportunities for cultural and artistic activities. The state shall protect children from the illegal use of drugs. Capital punishment or life imprisonment shall not be imposed for crimes committed before the age of 18. Children of minority and indigenous population shall freely enjoy their own culture, religion and language.

Although in Canada we have often talked about these objectives as a country, we have also had a great deal of difficulty reaching these goals. Part of the problem, and I think this is the origin of this particular private member's motion, is the fact that so many of our responsibilities dealing with children are in fact split between the provincial and federal governments.

Think of the way we have distributed responsibilities. Family allowances are federal; child welfare is basically provincial. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms is federal; education is provincial. The Criminal Code is federal. Income support is both provincial and federal, depending on the particular piece of legislation. Municipal services which affect children in areas such as recreation are under the umbrella of the provincial governments. Housing can be either federal or provincial. Disability assistance can be either provincial or federal and child labour laws are provincial responsibilities. For this reason, it is important for the federal government not to sit back but to take the initiative to ensure that the provincial governments which must assume responsibility for this international piece of legislation understand the importance of it for all Cana-

dians so that we do not get locked into a Balkanized state and have one or two recalcitrant ministers refuse to sign.

I think of some of the pressing problems facing us with our children. Let us just go through the list quickly. It is enough to disturb any Canadian. There is the plight of native children, particularly in western Canada, on reserves and off reserves, and little action is being taken there. In the native community, the baby boom has come later and these problems will only get worse and worse if we do not act. The plight of young prostitutes in our cities, the emergence of street gangs, crime and drug-related activities, ethnic and racial tensions, the problem of homelessness among youth who have no place to go and wander the streets night after night. There is the impoverishment of families, particularly since this government took control. There are the single-parent families and the problems they have dealing with the responsibilities of their children. There is sexual abuse, which was already mentioned by previous speakers.

For these reasons we think that the government should not sit back and make speeches about what it has been trying to do but should admit, as all clear-thinking Canadians would admit, that in fact a great deal has to be done in the near future to protect our children.

This motion represents but one small step in the activities that the Canadian government could be taking, and in fact will represent a first step in a very, very difficult process of ensuring provincial co-operation. We have seen that the strategy of this government in one domain after another has been to allow the provincial governments to do whatever they want. This is not a time to wait for the provincial governments to do what they want but in fact is a time to establish federal authority, federal leadership, and ensure that Canada becomes a signatory to this agreement as well as the provincial governments.

Mr. David Barrett (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to participate in this debate. No political party has a monopoly on what is best for the children of this country, but all of us as legislators have a responsibility to understand that for years, there has been neglect in this field and it is within the power of this small chamber to affect the lives of over 1,200,000 children in this country who do live below the poverty line.