

Government Orders

ignored the plight of disadvantaged Canadians, as it continues to do with Bill C-32.

In conclusion, I would say that the experiences of the past suggest that if the government does not reform its way in this regard, in this most crucial of areas, it risks not only the lives of our least advantaged citizens. It risks the very nation itself.

• (1730)

Mr. Jim Peterson (Willowdale): Mr. Speaker, the government today with this bill is continuing its assault on the poorest and the most disadvantaged people in Canada. This thrust is not new.

Mr. Speaker, you will recall that the first measure taken by this government, after it assumed office in 1984, in the realm of social policies was to try to deindex the pensions of Canada's seniors. Seniors revolted *en masse*. They appeared on the Hill. Finally, the government had to back down. Had those seniors not had the will or the means to fight back, we in this House alone as members of Parliament would not have had the strength to make it happen. It was their demonstration of political will which forced this government to back down.

What do the Conservatives do? They continue their assault. They went about clawing back seniors' pensions and they were able to get that through. The heart had been taken out of many of the seniors who protested.

That assault continues today with their measure to take away the Canada Assistance Plan. This Canada Assistance Plan, as has been explained by my colleagues, is the last resort for those who suffer from poverty. When a person can get no assistance elsewhere, they have to resort to the social programs that come under the Canada Assistance Plan.

This was a plan entered into whereby the federal government said to the provinces: "We will bear half the cost of your ultimate social assistance programs". What has it done? It put a cap on it of 5 per cent a year for Ontario. This cap was put on at a particular time in our economic history. It was put on in June 1990 when unemployment in Ontario was at 5.8 per cent.

All of us are concerned about the deficit and our national debt. If we can find ways to economize, we want to do it. Maybe back in June 1990 there was some

justification, although I disagreed with it vehemently at that time because it was a program for the most needy in our society. There was maybe some justification when Ontario had only 5.8 per cent unemployment to cut back on the CAP program.

It did not take the Conservatives very long to come forward with another program. Eight months later, in February 1991, they said not only will this 5 per cent ceiling exist for two years, but they brought in a budget that said it is going to go for five years. This capping of the CAP is taking \$2.135 billion away from the poor people of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario.

When they brought in that extending bill in the budget of February 1991, unemployment was no longer 5.8 per cent in Ontario. It was 9.5 per cent. Today, unemployment in Ontario is still slightly below our national average, but it is up to 9.9 per cent.

Even if you can say that the justification was that they had to save funds and they were going to impose that onus on the rich provinces, such as Ontario, back in 1990 that justification no longer existed. In February 1991 when they brought in the budget, or today when we are asked to vote on this bill, unemployment is high in Ontario.

In June 1990, when they brought this bill in originally, unemployment in Toronto was 4.5 per cent. Today it is above the national average. It is a disgrace that Canada's foremost city has unemployment of 10.8 per cent. What does this mean in terms of the poor of my city, the metropolitan Toronto area? What does this mean to the poor in Ontario?

Not only is unemployment dramatically up from when they brought in this bill, but welfare has risen incredibly. Welfare is up in the province of Ontario 64 per cent over a year ago, and yet the CAP program is going to cut it off at a 5 per cent increase. It has absolutely no relation to the needs of the people.

Maybe under some neo-Conservative philosophy this would be justified, if these people had alternatives. Maybe some neo-Conservative is going to say: "Let these people on welfare go out and get a job", but how can you find a job in the Toronto area when the unemployment is 10.8 per cent today? It is not their fault they are unemployed. It is this government, which has