

● (5:40 p.m.)

There are certain sections of the law in Canada which still reflect the attitudes of another era, an era in which it was assumed that all married women were wholly dependent upon and supported by their husbands, and problems relating to the responsibility for surviving dependents were viewed as problems solely affecting the male provider. Times have changed, and changed dramatically. I know that during election time when we go door-to-door in the process of canvassing our respective constituencies, so often we find there is no housewife at the door. She is out working, trying to earn money to put food on the family table.

I am sure hon. members realize full well the dramatic differences between the Canada of today and the Canada of 25 years ago. There are in this country today several hundred thousand women who are the sole supporters of their families. Some of these women are widows, others have been deserted, others have been divorced and thousands are married women who must work because their husbands are unable to secure enough income to provide a decent standard of living for the family. This is the situation we are talking about.

Today more than one out of every three women is in the Canadian labour force. There are now in Canada 2.5 million women employed. This represents one million more than there were 10 years ago. More than half of these women are married. In other words, of the 2.5 million women employed, more than half are married. There are 1½ million married women in the Canadian labour force. In 1951, 11 per cent of all married women went out to work. This figure has now risen to over 30 per cent, and all of the analyses available to the government indicate that this trend will continue and that there will be an even higher percentage in the future.

All of us should bear in mind the following figures. In August of 1970 the total Canadian labour force was 8,720,000. The total number of women 14 years of age or over was 7,601,000. The number of women in the labour force was 2,733,000, 36 per cent of the total population of women or 31.3 per cent of the total labour force. This is an incredible figure. Not only is it significant from the sociological standpoint, but we see increasingly the importance of women in Canada's general drive toward greater productivity. The GNP in very large measure is the result of the work of women in the labour force.

Let us compare these figures with the figures for 1931. The total labour force then was 3,921,833. The total number of women in Canada 14 years of age or over was 3,481,089. The total number of women in the labour force was 665,302, 19.1 per cent of the total population of women or 17 per cent of the total labour force. So we have seen an increase between 1931 and 1970 from 17 per cent of the total labour force to 31.3 per cent of the total labour force. Against this background it seems clear that legislative standards governing maternity leave are both necessary and desirable. The government in no way quarrels with this concept. Against this background it seems equally clear that other legislative reforms are needed to assist the women in Canada's work force.

Maternity Leave Act

The White Paper with the "golden cover", entitled "Unemployment Insurance in the 70s", is a remarkable document and deserves to be given far greater publicity by all members of the House. It is perhaps one of the most advanced documents relating to social legislation to come before Canada's Parliament. This document states with validity:

The rewards of economic growth should be directed not only toward the individuals who have had the opportunity for a good education, a well-paid job, a two-car garage and a home in the country... They are also for the widow or divorcee working long hours.

I think it should be added that society's concern must be extended to those who have been cruelly deserted and to those married women living on the economic margin. We talk a great deal about the just society. Indeed, this goal should be the object of all our activities in the House. In a truly just society the rewards of economic growth cannot, and must not, be denied to those married women who because of economic circumstances must go out to work in order to put food on the table and help raise their families in human dignity.

This country and the party which the people of this country chose to be the government in 1968 have built a remarkable record of social legislation, and there are those in other parties who are similarly concerned about the need for improved social legislation. No one claims a monopoly of interest in that field. Much of this reform has taken place over the past 35 years. That legislation has been geared to meet a whole spectrum of human needs. Despite this good legislation, the need for reform continues.

One area of need has been outlined today by the sponsor of this bill and by others who have participated in the debate. It must be obvious that a need for maternity leave exists, particularly in view of the increasing numbers and importance of women in Canada's work force. For anyone to suggest that the government and the Minister of Labour (Mr. Mackasey) hold a contrary view, represents a distortion of fact. Surely no one in this House would ever attempt to distort facts. The Minister of Labour has distinguished himself as a strong supporter of women's rights, including maternity rights. The hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway (Mrs. MacInnis) may have been in the House on November 25, 1968, when the minister said:

The idea of maternity leave is certainly not an original one. It makes sense and it should at least be part of the provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Act, if nothing else, when unemployment insurance comes up for drastic overhaul early in the new year.

This document "Unemployment Insurance in the 70s" reflects the real concern by the government of the need for action in this area. Admittedly, it talks in terms of compensation during the period of pregnancy, but it must be obvious that the two concepts of maternity leave and compensation during a period of maternity must go hand in hand. I want to assure this House that the government's and the minister's determination is still to correct