

Old Age Security Act

The Ontario minister said:

Social policy needs must be discussed immediately and on a comprehensive basis . . . What we must now fully realize and accept is the urgent need to devise an overall integrated approach in this area.

Non-governmental agencies have also been urging such an integrated approach. In its statement "Social Policies for Canada" in 1969 the Canadian Welfare Council recommended that "the federal and provincial governments, in concert, should undertake a nation-wide study of Canada's social security system." Only in this way, it said, can we "achieve a more integrated and satisfactory system of social security."

As a result of our discussions it was agreed that the federal government should not at this time move to change the structure of the OAS system as we have it now, and that any such changes should only be considered as part of the overall review of the whole income security system. We should embark on such an overall review immediately and hold a first conference by the end of April.

Only then can we get a proper perspective on all those people who live in poverty rather than selected groups like the spouses of old age pensioners.

Mr. Speaker, the approach the provinces are pressing on this Parliament is directly in line with the third principle enunciated in the Speech from the Throne which called for "a fair and just relationship" between the guaranteed incomes for people who cannot work, such as the aged, and the allowances paid to those who can work but are unemployed. The review to be undertaken by us jointly with the provinces will seek to work out such a fair and just relationship among the various programs.

The following comparison will perhaps illustrate the problem. With the present increase in OAS pensions, people over 65 will be entitled to incomes of at least \$170 a month if single or \$324 a month at the married rate. But people who are not yet 65, including those under 60, who must rely on provincial social assistance for support, are entitled to much smaller benefit levels. Single people can receive maximum payments of from \$100 a month to \$135 a month, a married couple, from \$150 to \$235 a month. This is the situation, despite the fact that under the Canada Assistance Plan the federal government contributes 50 per cent of the amounts paid by the provinces for social welfare. I repeat, while we give from \$170 to \$324, depending whether people are single or married, the amount varies from \$100 to \$135, and from \$150 to \$235 a month, for people now receiving welfare allowances from the provinces. This is why the provinces argue that first priority should be given to the need for raising benefit levels of poor families in general.

Let us turn now to the situation of persons aged between 60 and 64 years, which, I know, worries not only opposition members but members of our own party who raised the matter with me and in discussions.

Approximately 20,000 people in this age group were unemployed and looking for work in 1972; 5.2 per cent were part of the labour force. Considering this, we should ask ourselves if it would be wise to give greater priority to lowering the pensionable age than to other measures

[Mr. Lalonde.]

which can be taken to improve the lot of the disadvantaged.

In our society there are 150,000 mothers who by themselves have to raise 330,000 children; 200,000 invalid people aged between 18 and 65; and 575,000 social aid recipients registered in the provinces. This figure comes to about 1.4 million if we count their dependents. The monthly benefits paid to these persons are well below the sum of \$170 received by pensioners over 65 years of age. Of all the groups of Canadians in need of aid, why should those who are between 60 and 65 years of age receive priority above all others? By that I do not mean to say that this group does not matter, but rather that—before a decision is made—the situations of the other groups should be examined with equal attention. At a first glance, it would seem to me that mothers who have sole responsibility for raising their children are as much entitled to draw on public funds as 360,000 persons in the 60-65 age group who are working and earning an income.

What is even more important, I believe that we should take the steps necessary to ensure that all Canadians—regardless of age—have the means to meet their needs. This is the goal I set myself in accepting the portfolio of Minister of National Health and Welfare, and it is the goal that the present government set itself in the last Speech from the Throne.

• (1550)

[English]

We must look at the question of overall priorities. These priorities have not yet been established. The relative social priorities of benefits for pensioners' spouses or for widows and single women in the same age group, or for disabled people of any age, or for families struggling to raise young children on limited incomes, ought to be closely examined. The provincial ministers were unanimous in expressing the view that we should not interfere with the structure of the OAS program until we have had a chance to review with them the overall structure of the whole income security system. Which is the group with greatest need for income support at the present time? Would we be justified in providing \$150 or \$170 a month for people aged 60 to 64, while disabled people are entitled to only \$100 to \$135 a month under provincial social assistance? Would it be a more appropriate step to channel any available resources toward low income families in order to supplement family income which is inadequate to meet the needs of their dependent children?

These are exactly the kinds of questions which will be tackled in the forthcoming federal-provincial review of the whole income security system. These questions simply serve to show how necessary it is that such an overall review be made.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[Translation]

Mr. Lalonde: In view of the foregoing, I trust that the aid that we propose to make available to aged persons under the present act will receive the immediate and unanimous approval of the House. Of the 1.8 million OAS pensioners, the vast majority are over 70 years of age. These are the people hardest hit by rising prices, for they have no other