

Children's Rights

Mr. Lachance: Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the hon. member would allow me a question.

Mr. McGrath: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Lachance: Mr. Speaker, I merely want to put a question to the hon. member because he referred to the Standing Committee on Regulations and Other Statutory Instruments. Does he not feel that precisely because the committee is empowered to examine such regulations as concern it and, because it reports periodically to the House, the latter does have the power to scrutinize the regulations the minister may introduce eventually in order to check and see that they respect the act authorizing them?

[*English*]

Mr. McGrath: I thank the hon. member for that question, Mr. Speaker. Certainly he has a point. However, I remind him that just a few days ago the House unanimously supported a recommendation or a report of the statutory instruments committee where it found that the government had in fact exceeded its authority under the Post Office Act and arbitrarily increased postal rates. The government completely ignored that committee recommendation. What can we expect from a government that virtually ignores the workings of this most important committee of the House? Consequently, we feel that this amendment is vital if the rights of parliament are going to be protected.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier): Order, please. It being four o'clock, the House will now proceed to the consideration of private member's business as listed on today's order paper, namely, public bills, notices of motions, private bills.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pinard: Mr. Speaker, I think there is unanimous consent for proceeding with Bill C-243 and, consequently, that preceding bills be allowed to stand.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier): The House has heard the suggestion of the parliamentary secretary. Is it agreed?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BILLS

[*English*]

CANADIAN BILL OF RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN

MEASURE TO PROTECT FREEDOM AND DIGNITY OF CHILDREN

Mr. James A. McGrath (St. John's East) moved that Bill C-243, respecting a Canadian Bill of Rights for Children, be read the second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs.

[*The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ethier.)*]

He said: Mr. Speaker, 1979 will mark the twentieth anniversary of the signing by Canada and the passing by the General Assembly of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, a declaration that was adopted by the General Assembly on November 20, 1959. Perhaps it might be appropriate if I were to cite part of that very important declaration to which Canada is a signatory. I quote Principle 2:

The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually, and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. In the enactment of law for this purpose, the best interests of the child shall be the paramount considerations.

● (1602)

As I have stated, that was adopted by the United Nations. It was signed and ratified by Canada approximately 19 years ago. Up to now, our laws have reflected the belief that a child's interest can be served best within the traditional family unit. That belief is now being questioned by increasing numbers of parents, educators and hopefully politicians, as they face the serious problems of the child in today's society.

There are a number of areas which I could cover to define what I believe to be the rights of Canadian children, and the need to have these rights defined by law. Let us take a look at poverty and malnutrition. Who would think, in this great land of plenty, that poverty and malnutrition would be a problem? Statistics Canada defines poverty as a state where more than 62 per cent of family income is required to provide the minimum necessities of food, shelter and clothing. The National Council of Welfare report entitled, "Poor Kids" is dated March 1975. I commend that excellent publication to the House. It indicates that according to the 1971 census, 1.65 million of the total 6.76 million children, or 24.5 per cent, were classified as below the poverty line. The census found substantial numbers of children living in poverty in every province. I am sad to say the highest proportion was in my own province of Newfoundland where almost half the province's children, 45.3 per cent, were in families with incomes below the poverty line. But even in rich provinces, the so-called "have" provinces of Ontario and British Columbia, more than one child in six came under the definition of poverty.

It is interesting to read through this publication to understand what poverty means to a child. It is a very moving document. I should like to read from one letter written by a poor child in New Brunswick. It reads as follows:

My name is Pierre and I'm 13 years old. I'm the eldest of seven children. What makes me suffer most is not having a house, having to live in a shack where it's always cold and too small for all the family. There are nine of us. The seven children all sleep together in two 36-inch wide beds—pushed together in winter for more heat since we don't have enough blankets. We have an old broken-down stove. In the winter we push the beds near the stove, but it's dangerous.

The letter goes on. In fact, this publication contains a number of similar letters reflecting the plight of poor children in this country who lack the basic necessities of shelter, clothing, and an adequate diet. Lack of nutrition is not necessarily a problem confined to the poor. It has become a problem of nationwide proportion, thanks to the fact that we have many