

*Canadian Economy*

ty. All these children grow up without as much food as other kids get to eat, without the same kind of clothing as other kids wear, without the same quality of shelter as other kids enjoy, without the toys that other kids play with: without, in short, the sources of joy in childhood which make adult life a desirable possibility. This is what poverty means. In addition, such children are much more likely to fall sick. They are more likely to incur permanent brain damage as a result of malnutrition. They are less likely to go on to institutions of higher learning. They are less likely, in short, to do all the things the more affluent three-quarters of our children take for granted. This, surely, is one of the most damning indictments of a government of any advanced country.

The tragedy is compounded by the fact that, unlike India, China or other countries in Southeast Asia and South America, Canada has no excuse. There is no justification for the situation described in "Poor Kids" because there is no justification for poverty in a society such as ours. The report itself says: "There is no need for poverty in Canada". The Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde) made the same point in a speech delivered last fall in Toronto when he used very similar statistics based upon the population as a whole. In a moving speech, he documented in unequivocal terms the maldistribution of income in Canada; the fact that after 25 years of so-called progressive government, government which has supposedly been concerned about tax policies leading to a redistribution of income, no such redistribution has taken place. He showed that the whole operation had been a sham. I say this as a man who at one time really believed that such policies were working and that they were significant instruments of social change. However, I repeat, no such redistribution has taken place. The top 20 per cent of our population enjoys 40 per cent of our income, and the bottom 20 per cent—the poor people of Canada—have something less than 10 per cent.

● (1540)

What needs to be done, Mr. Speaker? Other nations of the world, the developing nations, have to generate industry to bring their economies to capacity. This takes decades. What we need to fight poverty is simply a change in governmental attitude, policy and direction that will take the wealth we already have and more fairly distribute it in society. The minister who made that fine and moving speech in Toronto last fall, the Minister of National Health and Welfare, does not speak hypocritically, but the government as a whole is being hypocritical when it does not heed the minister's expressed concern and call for leadership in this regard.

The Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner), in the same month as the minister's speech, presented a budget that did nothing to rectify the evils that the Minister of National Health and Welfare so vividly described. It seems to me that you cannot express fundamental and moral concern for the people of Canada, either inside or outside the House, without taking the opportunity which presents

[Mr. Broadbent.]

itself in a budget to demonstrate in some way an intention to remedy the social evil you have described. That is exactly the situation with the present government. On the one hand, the government talks of society's problems, particularly poverty among adults and children; and on the other hand, when it gets a chance to act it completely fails to do so. The Minister of National Health and Welfare is not responsible for the budget, of course; that is the direct responsibility of the Minister of Finance. But the government as a whole cannot be excused for failing to act.

The Minister of National Health and Welfare over the past two years has been developing a guaranteed minimum income program. Two or three weeks ago ministers from the provinces met the minister in Ottawa to discuss what a lot of people thought was going to be the framework for a minimum income program to deal with the poverty that he himself had described in such moving terms last fall in Toronto. What has been the government's decision in regard to that program? Did the government say that it is time we in Canada eliminated a situation where one kid in four lives in poverty? In fact, about 20 per cent of our total population live in poverty. The government did not say, Mr. Speaker, that it was going to remove this evil. The Minister of National Health and Welfare, I understand under pressure from his cabinet colleagues, backed away from taking the kind of action that could have led—I say this with care and with seriousness—to the eradication of poverty within one year. As the report has documented, this could be done in this country within one year if income were redistributed.

This is not an utopian scheme for Canada in 1975, Mr. Speaker. If you had talked about it ten years ago, then you could not have said it could be done within one year. But if we want to eliminate poverty today, we can do it either by bringing in a negative income tax scheme, the details of which are well known to the cabinet, or by amending the Canada Assistance Plan Act. This was a step that a number of welfare ministers from the provinces wanted the government to take so as to make sure that all families in Canada living at or below the poverty line could overnight have their level of payments under the plan increased. Two or three weeks ago the Minister of National Health and Welfare scuttled any move in that direction, putting off once again to some future date the implementation of some kind of minimum income program in Canada. I say this is a national tragedy. It is something that could have been avoided and not put off to some distant date in the future.

The last area of specific concern, in terms of the national economy, about which I wish to say something is housing. Our party regards housing as a social right. It should not be considered a commodity that can be compared to a colour television set or an expensive car; it should be regarded by Canadians, in 1975, as medical services or elementary school education are regarded—as a basic right in an industrial country like ours. It is something we should take for granted if we are willing to work for it. Nobody gets anything for nothing, but if people are willing to work they should be able to get housing in 1975, just as they can get medicare or elementary school education. Housing should not be contingent upon having an exceptionally high income.