

Government Orders

Indeed, solutions are urgently needed, but when you make profound changes, you must make sure that they are done well, that they will not only remedy the problem for a week or a month but provide a long-term solution.

I am sure that the people concerned have good ideas to suggest and that we will make a better decision if we listen to them.

Mr. Jean Landry (Lotbinière): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to thank my parents, my family, the constituents of my riding of Lotbinière and all those who have worked directly or indirectly to help me get elected. Thank you.

If I may, I would like to start my maiden speech by briefly describing the beautiful riding of Lotbinière that I am proud to represent. Flanked by the St. Lawrence River to the north, it includes more than 50 communities with a total population of 94,315.

The largest community is the recently merged city of Victoriaville-Arthabasca which is home to almost 40,000 people. Victoriaville-Arthabasca is the third most industrialized city, per capita, in Quebec with close to 200 industries. Sir Wilfrid Laurier's house overlooks the city, where the Susor-Côté family, Henri d'Arles and other famous people were born.

The riding I represent offers many tourist attractions such as the Lapierre mill in Norbertville, the Portage mill in Lotbinière, the Bergeron plant in Saint-Antoine-de-Tilly, not to mention the region's numerous covered bridges, historic homes and churches.

For a period of about ten years, the riding of Lotbinière was represented in the House of Commons by the late André Fortin. Mr. Fortin had a reputation for working tirelessly and with unsurpassed vigour to defend the interests of his constituents. I humbly hope that I can be worthy of that former member of Parliament who achieved big things in this riding. If serving the population means being a good member of Parliament, this is what I intend to do.

I rise today to urge the Liberal government to think twice before slashing social programs. Despite being optimistic by nature, I must admit that rural regions such as mine are faced with growing poverty.

• (1720)

According to Statistics Canada, 4,680 men and women aged 15 and over collected unemployment insurance in 1991 in the riding of Lotbinière, and this number has not improved with the recession we have been through. Three years ago, unemployment stood at 11 per cent of a labour force of 45,800. Add those on welfare and much of the population will be affected by the measures which the government intends to take.

The reason I refer to my region is that, like other rural regions, it is in danger of suffering unduly from an ill-considered reform of social programs. We are trying to get our head above water and we fear that the Liberal government will put its hand on our head and make us sink further. The regions are already in trouble compared to the major centres. I certainly do not want to sound alarmist, but if we go by the social development report published by Quebec's Conseil des affaires sociales, we must admit that Quebec is split in two. Indeed, in the first report published in January 1989, we see an analysis of 25 regional county municipalities along the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, showing a decrease or no increase in population for 18 of them between 1981 and 1986.

Of course, the exodus of our young people to major centres has a lot to do with it. Why do young people leave their home regions? Employment is their very legitimate reason. It is a vicious circle because the higher the jobless rate in a community, the more young people tend to leave it, as we can read in the report of the Conseil des affaires sociales. For want of economic and social opportunities, our young adults move to the big cities, leaving behind an aging population which for that very reason is more dependent on the state.

There are two Quebecs, one young and prosperous, the other aging and poor. That is the situation in Quebec now, and it is no doubt the same in other provinces of Canada. Even though feelings of attachment remain strong in rural regions like Lotbinière, Charlevoix, Matapédia and Lac-Saint-Jean, the centralization of government services in cities identified as regional capitals obliges the people in the regions to travel to obtain services.

Another example, taken from the report of the Conseil des affaires sociales published in 1990, shows that technical options are not being offered in regional high schools but rather in larger centres. Therefore many fifteen-year-olds go to the city not only to study but also in the hope of finding work. For example, Statistics Canada reported that nearly 35 per cent of the population in my riding was at least 40 years old in 1991.

The Minister of Human Resource Development said this week that he wanted the reform of social programs to create hope and to end dependency, especially by creating jobs. I would love to believe the minister, but nothing in his speech tells us how those jobs will be created. Where is the hope for the people of the rural regions I just mentioned? Their hope now lies in the help they receive from social programs, imperfect as these may be. The government will pay its debt with money taken from social services, forcing the provinces to raise taxes again and putting the federal government in a good light. There is more and more discontent in the regions and I hope that the minister is aware of the situation.