

got somewhere not that the language the government is using in its amendment is the language of my bill, but at least the same intent is there. If you look back, you will find that until very recently letters from the Prime Minister and from ministers of the cabinet have been going to the Mennonites explaining to them why we could not possibly make this kind of an amendment. So the other important and very assuring aspect is that governments are in fact prepared to change their minds and take another look at a situation.

I also want to express my deep appreciation to the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles). I can tell you that while it took a fair amount of persuading of the government and other members of the House, no one was more difficult to persuade than the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre. While I am sure he has his reservations about changes in the principle of universality, I am very pleased that he accepts some of the arguments that have been put forward. To me this is very important. I greatly value his judgment, and certainly his support, and I am pleased to see that he will support this amendment.

My first involvement with the Mennonites took place in a little town called New Hamburg. I was talking to a fine looking gentleman who seemed very friendly. There was an election at that time and I was campaigning. He listened to everything I was saying and was being very encouraging. I was quite happy. I said to one of my campaign workers afterwards, "Things look good. I saw Mr. So-and-So, and he looks friendly". He said, "Forget it." "What do you mean?" I asked. He said "Mr. So-and-So is an Old Order Mennonite and he does not vote". Even when they do vote, the tendency has always been to vote for the government in power as a way of not affecting a change and assuming the least responsibility for some of the things that have gone on in this world. I should say that my philosophy is not that of the Old Order of Mennonites.

● (1540)

But I would not like to see a society in which my philosophy, or anybody else's philosophy, was imposed on other people without any real pressing necessity for that. The Mennonites are unusual for a number of reasons. They have a claim against society. They argue that promises were made to them when they came to Canada to exempt them not only from military service but from other programs. Admittedly, at the time those promises were made there were no insurance programs as we know them today. The government was not heavily involved in welfare, but the implied promise was that they could live their lives differently from the people around them.

I am satisfied, from looking over the documents that were signed by the governments of that day, that a promise was made to the Old Order of Mennonites on that basis, and to the extent that it is possible for a changing society to honour that kind of guarantee we should do so. The Mennonites are a pacifist group. They have been objecting to the moneys taken from them for the purposes of the Canada Pension Plan, but they have never resorted to violence. The government has been seizing their milk cheques to collect the Canada Pension Plan contributions simply because the Mennonites refuse to pay those contributions. This procedure was the result of a tacit agree-

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ment between the government and the group because, had the Mennonites contributed voluntarily they would have broken a very important oath that each of them takes.

It is important to put on the record the position the Mennonites are in from a religious point of view with respect to the kind of oath that one takes on becoming a Mennonite. Here, it is important to remember that we are not talking about all Mennonites. The vast majority are not in the same position as those in the Old Order of Mennonites. In my area the Old Order represents something less than 800 families, and there are many thousands of Mennonites who do not go along with some of the views of the Old Order. Members of the Old Order hold to the following:

The church, we believe, is a genuine brotherhood in which individual members obligate themselves to help one another in time of need and to be willing to submit to the discipline and the counsel of the total brotherhood.

A central teaching and practice of the Mennonite church from the 16th century until today has been that of Christian mutual aid.

Their objection to insurance of any sort, private as well as public, is that it violates their obligation to assist each other. I do not find their view unattractive. If we could extend the view of mutual aid to our entire society we would do well. To some extent we do so through insurance programs, but as I have pointed out they object to such programs. It may be difficult for me to understand their position clearly. My mind is not tuned to this in the same way as their minds are, but I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that members of the Old Order of Mennonites feel strongly about this matter.

I remember discussions in the standing committee, when a number of members made the point that the Old Order of Mennonites are not the only people objecting to the Canada Pension Plan, and that there were all kinds of people who would like to opt out of that plan. But the distinction concerns their reasons. In the latter case, people might get a better deal through a private plan rather than from the public plan. But that is not the objection of the Old Order of Mennonites.

To prove their sincerity they have said, "We are willing to pay the amount of money required from us as contributions, and we are willing to forgo any benefits from the Canada Pension Plan, but we do not wish our money to be paid into an insurance program. We will pay it into a charity, or into foreign aid, or into some other fund from which we do not get any direct benefit." That is an important distinction. When hon. members say that there are other people who would like to opt out of the Canada Pension Plan then I ask, are those people prepared to take the Mennonite test, that is, pay the premiums but not take any benefits, to show that their objection is one of principle and not of pocketbook? People often want to opt out for pecuniary reasons.

If a person wishes to opt out of the Canada Pension Plan, we are in a position to test his sincerity of principle by telling him that if he is willing to forgo the benefits, but still pay the alternative to premiums, as the Mennonites propose, then there is no reason why he cannot opt out. But I do not think many people would take up that offer. I have always been a strong proponent of universality, and like the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre