

Old Age Security Act

we, as representatives of the people of Canada, have a responsibility for their dignity in old age with a lifestyle that is free of want. Consequently, we implemented the guaranteed income supplement, old age security, senior medicare programs as well as dental programs. Now we should be looking at the extension of these services to as many people as possible in that particular age group. Our policy suggestion has always been that if we cannot move the applicable age down to 60 universally, then what we should do is make the allowance available at age 60 for anybody who is not in the workforce. That is what we will attempt to do in committee.

● (1140)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Continuing debate. The Hon. Member for Charlevoix (Mr. Hamelin).

[*Translation*]

Mr. Charles Hamelin (Charlevoix): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy with this opportunity to take part in the debate on Bill C-26, to amend the Old Age Security Act. Under this legislation, next September the spouse's allowance will be extended to all widows and widowers between the ages of 60 and 64 and living on low incomes. They will benefit from this allowance regardless of the age of their spouse at death.

Those Canadians will receive up to a maximum of \$536.26 per month, to be indexed quarterly to the cost of living. More than 85,000 Canadians will benefit from this new measure.

Mr. Speaker, I think we should applaud this new proposal which will help consolidate and upgrade the old age security program. During the last election campaign, I met with groups of widows and widowers in my riding who took advantage of the opportunity to inform me about their extremely precarious situation. In many cases the sudden death of a spouse had left them without any significant income, often with dependents, either directly or indirectly. Those people had high hopes in our plan to upgrade the old age security system, and I am sure that today, they will be able to point with pride to their new Progressive Conservative Government that is going to "deliver the goods" and provide them with a significant measure of assistance.

The House will recall, and I think this is important considering certain arguments that have been made recently, that the implementation of this new proposal will involve additional spending of \$190 million, and over \$350 million in 1986-87 when the program has been in existence for one year.

Mr. Speaker, of course our Government would have liked to have done more for all individuals in the 60 to 64 age group by extending its program to those who are single, divorced or separated, as the opposition parties have insisted that we do. Unfortunately, the disastrous financial situation we have inherited from a series of previous governments precludes committing the \$1.5 billion that would be involved in extending this program to all people on low incomes in this age group. Of course, the fact that previous governments saw the public treasury as a well that would never run dry is now

preventing this Government from extending the program to all widows and widowers between 60 and 64, and this obviously leaves us very little room to manoeuvre and to do everything we would like to do to provide a decent standard of living for all these groups. It is also obvious that if we were not facing a deficit that will reach nearly \$200 billion this year, our Government would be in a position to consider a far more generous old age security program.

I think we must regenerate Canada's wealth before we can share it. That is the objective and that is the position of the Government that was elected on September 4 of last year. We must stabilize the Government's financial situation. We are working on it very actively and we have no choice but to succeed unless we want to be haunted once again by the spectre of bankruptcy that threatened this country until September 4 of last year.

Meanwhile, although this measure is not a panacea for all the problems facing the elderly in general and widowed individuals in particular, the 85,000 Canadians who are anxiously waiting for Parliament to adopt this new measure will have cause to rejoice. I think that our Government and Progressive Conservatives and in fact the entire House will have cause for rejoicing, and I am delighted to see that this Government, as it said in the Throne Speech, is delivering the goods and is trying to gradually improve the old age security program, and I think this is a very significant measure that the House should approve.

Hon. Jean Lapierre (Shefford): Mr. Speaker, it was very interesting to listen to the debate and hear the Hon. Member for Charlevoix (Mr. Hamelin) sing the praises of this Government, but I am rather disappointed that the Hon. Member did not ask himself whether this measure was fair and equitable, whether this kind of discrimination was acceptable in a free and democratic society, and whether, now that we have our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, we can tell people: We are going to make a distinction on the basis of your marital status. Whether we can say, in a society like ours: Mrs. So-and-So, you are widowed and you are entitled to the allowance, and, to a single woman: You are not entitled to the allowance, when they are both in the same financial situation.

Mr. Speaker, I fail to understand why the previous speaker is not worried about the inherent injustice of this legislation. I think Hon. Members on the other side of the House are well aware of the fact that this Bill discriminates on the basis of religion. I see the Parliamentary Secretary, the Member for Brome-Missisquoi (Mrs. Bertrand) who is aware of the situation of nuns in Canada, especially Catholic nuns who, unfortunately or perhaps fortunately, are not allowed to marry, according to their religion, and who will now be discriminated against because they have decided to dedicate their lives to God, and although they "marry" God, they are not likely to be widowed.