

Old Age Security

The old age pensioner has become a pawn in what I believe is a very heartless political game. Yesterday, as recorded at page 6267 of *Hansard*, the hon. member for Vaudreuil said that on two occasions in the last year the government had raised the old age pension. I ask him and the government: where has the largesse come from? Why is there this magnanimity at the moment? It is clearly a reaction to a political situation that demands a solution. The government's answer is to index pensions—but is that a solution to the basic problem?

The basic problem is inflation. The government is saying to pensioners, "We will keep you in the same relative position but we will not cure the root of the problem of inflation." Will the old age pensioner be in a better position by virtue of the passage of Bill C-219 or will he still be the victim of inflation? The old age pensioner cannot financially protect himself as well as the active worker or corporation. It is our responsibility to protect him.

In reply to the hon. member for Vaudreuil, I submit that this is not largesse or magnanimity on the part of the government. It is a panic reaction after the government has made the old age pensioner a victim of inflation. We have all too often made the old age pensioner a pawn for political reasons, for election votes. Members on all sides of the House have been responsible for this. If votes were to be gained, pension increases were given. My political philosophy is such that I am not a proponent of increased government spending. I am not a proponent of simply handing out money when a crisis situation arises. But I want to place clearly on the record that a pension is not a handout: it is something one has earned.

In my opening remarks I pointed out that too many of our senior citizens did not have the ability or opportunity to establish a relatively independent financial position for themselves. As a result, they must rely on government. It is incumbent upon us to provide them with a pension on which they can live in dignity. Only in this way can they maintain dignity.

Even though we welcome this bill, what is needed is an over-all thrust at the root problem of inflation which affects every person in Canadian society. We are not simply faced with a rate of inflation to which people can become accustomed. Today we have runaway inflation. That is why the government must again adjust old age pensions. That is why the government must introduce an interim program to increase family allowances. It is because of the complete failure of the government's financial responsibility, to which the Minister of Finance alluded in his budget speech. The minister said that his budget would do two things—put more disposable income in the hands of consumers, and check runaway inflation. In placing this bill before us the government admits that those two statements are no longer true and possibly were never true.

If this bill is to be the thrust of the fight against inflation, at least according to the government, I point out it is not a prescription to cure an ailment. At best it is a shin-plaster to cure bone cancer. It is simply not enough to present this House with a pension indexing system to restore purchasing power to a level which was not adequate in the first instance.

[Mr. Epp.]

I wish to present one or two views that the department should consider. I shall digress from the group 65 years of age and over. The group of people between 60 and 65 years of age has already been mentioned by a number of speakers. As I travel through my constituency I receive many complaints from people in this group. Often they have had years of hard, physical work and now simply are not capable of meeting the physical requirements of their jobs. But they cannot leave those jobs because if they do they cannot find alternative, suitable employment. They are locked into a very difficult situation.

● (1620)

Therefore I submit to the minister, even though it has been done before, that his department should seriously consider reducing the pensionable age to 60, especially in light of the rate of inflation today. Perhaps it could be done on the same basis as when the age was reduced from 70 to 65. It might be done as a voluntary pension so that when a worker removed himself from the labour market he would be entitled to it. In that case, hopefully, the jobs vacated would be available to people between the ages of 18 and 25 where there is the highest unemployment rate. Not only would this government be responding to the needs of our older citizens, but it would be showing that it does not want to react in panic when inflation strikes and that it is seriously concerned about the purchasing power of pensioners rather than just making political gain when the need arises.

I submit, as other hon. members have, that we must look again at the basic amount of the old age pension which often is the only protection of senior citizens. It should be increased; this is the only way to increase the purchasing power and financial power of our older people. I am not so naïve as to believe that the opposition can simply make suggestions without showing responsibility relative to the cost involved here. Naturally, the department would have to study the cost. But the government is well aware of its surplus revenue position and that revenues have increased sharply.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I emphasize one point. Despite what we do with Bill C-219 to index the old age pension, and despite the increase in the family allowance to \$12 in October, we must get back to the root problem. The root problem, and the reason we are here today, is inflation. We cannot simply continue giving subsidies, indexing and reacting quarterly when we have to in an effort to beat inflation and protect the consumer. That just will not work.

Before the federal government, the provincial governments or the municipal governments curb spending in areas which do not have as high a priority as the one we are discussing today—and I think all hon. members agree with the priority of old age pensions—some relief must be given to the consumer, more purchasing power must be placed in the hands of the individual. Every Canadian is looking to this government, not for more subsidies but specifically to ensure that our position in October, November, December and next year will not have to be adjusted again. They want to know that a positive stance has been taken and that our relative purchasing power has not been eroded but, rather, increased.