

Old Age Security Act

he referred for our edification, and I am glad he did, was that the Liberal party's commitment on July 8, 1974, only dealt with married people. That is quite so, it did. What concerns me about this legislation is not so much the relationships that it envisages—and I am sure the committee will unscramble anything that has to be unscrambled—as the fact that it is given predominance in the legislation ahead of a group of people who, in terms of our economic life today, need some protection within the context of this bill, however limited it may be. I am referring to married couples who depend upon this type of payment for their existence.

If a priority is established, then it should be in favour of married couples because it was in that sense that the piece of literature with which we dealt at some length was phrased. Married couples should receive first priority within the context of this legislation, and they should not be sacrificed for others who might be qualified on a different basis.

Now I want to deal with one matter which, I am happy to say, is dealt with in the bill. It has to do with financial errors. I have written to the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde) on many occasions regarding problems of overpayment of pensions. I must say to the minister that he has always been very prompt in dealing with the correspondence I have sent to him, and I am sure that is generally the way he has dealt with correspondence from all members of parliament. Perhaps some of his colleagues in cabinet could emulate this. There is an immediate acknowledgement from the minister of letters sent to him, and there is always a follow up. I do not want that practice to change because I mention this today, but he is the one minister for whom it is not necessary to mark one's files to remind the minister to answer. I do not want his head to blow up so much that he will have difficulty getting into the lobby, but that is a statement of fact.

The unfortunate thing about this particular error which this bill is meant to catch, that is, financial error and the necessity of paying back, is that the necessity in law is there. There is absolutely nothing the minister can do in terms of his discretion to assist old age pensioners who find themselves in that position. His answer has always had to be that he is sorry, it was an error, and he apologizes. He can make all the excuses and protestations he wants, but whatever is the computer they use that made the mistake, older people do not necessarily take advantage of that kind of error, and there is nothing the minister can do about it. I have had this experience many times, and I understand that that is the reason for this provision in the bill.

I think it is a very important clause because it allows, in case of senior citizens, that special group of people who in terms of opportunities for advancement might be called disadvantaged, for an exercise of discretion such as other ministers, notably the Minister of Manpower and Immigration (Mr. Andras), have exercised with respect to ministerial permits in proper cases, and there is a question as to how it operates. I am not suggesting that the minister should be forgiven for errors which cause inconvenience, but I am suggesting that this is a very good provision for which the minister should be commended.

Our party's policy with regard to senior citizens is much more far reaching than is the government's, and it has been for some period of time. It is an expression of our concern for a group of Canadians who fall within a special category, not only because of the difficulties which they experience in the work force and in remaining in the work force in a society which puts increasing emphasis on youth, but because most senior citizens have made a significant contribution to the well-being of the community. They have laid the foundation upon which we advance. For that reason alone I think they are entitled to our consideration.

It is also important that we look at the needs and requirements of senior citizens from another point of view, the need which they have in their particular circumstances to care for themselves in terms of housing, food, and health services, all of which are very important components of the cost price index in this country. It is a fact which I do not think anyone will dispute, that senior citizens spend a larger proportion of their income on these necessities than do other citizens, and it is important therefore that we never lose sight of the necessity for constantly updating and reviewing the amounts of money we are prepared to pay as citizens in a progressive society toward their well-being.

It is important also that we take a look at the cost price index to see whether it is the proper index upon which to gauge their needs and requirements. Some people have spoken of an old persons' index or the index of the disadvantaged, in search of phrases that would be weighted in favour of senior citizens who might find themselves in need, because it is a fact that senior citizens have different needs and expenses than does the average Canadian family of four and, as a result, new measurements must be devised to meet these unique needs.

The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre the other day called for a basic old age pension of \$300, and he referred to it again today. I really do not know whether or not the country can afford that, but I believe that whether the figure is \$300 or any other figure, a country with our riches in terms of our resources, our gross national product and the opportunities which we are able to give to our young people, and to other people who do not have the disadvantages of senior citizens, should not lose sight of what is in the spirit of the suggestion of the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre.

● (1540)

I believe that senior citizens have to be treated as a special case. The hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre has made a life's work of treating senior citizens' pensions, superannuations and other pensions as special cases. I do not really believe we have tapped the possibilities with respect to aid, not only in terms of monthly cheques, but aid in terms of the provision of adequate housing, in terms of provision of adequate services for those who, perhaps through age, cannot get around as well as they might. There was an instance of this in Ottawa-Carleton not too long ago. I think these have to be considered in a special category.

When I think of the amounts of money the government has been prepared to spend in certain areas and when I