

greatest for those most in need and lowest for those least in need. Surely no Member of the House of Commons and no fair Canadian would argue that principle. I can tell the House categorically that those principles are inviolate. Our goal is not to abolish or erode anything. It is to improve the progressivity of what is already in place.

All the talk I have heard in the last few days has been about universality. To describe what the debate should focus on, let me offer two possible definitions of universality with which I think most Members of the House would be familiar. One definition might be that all social program should be available to everyone, regardless of need. The defenders of that definition, if there are any, must realize that they are not defending universality since no such thing presently exists. The guaranteed income supplement and the spousal allowance are two programs that are not universal, but available to those who meet certain tests.

Another definition of universality might see our social programs providing the same level of after-tax benefit to all recipients. Defenders of that definition must surely realize that there is no such thing as universality to meet that definition. The progressive tax system, which is not open to serious question so far as I know, ensures that benefits are taxed at a higher rate for high income earners than for low and middle income earners. There as well the definition needs clarification. I say tangentially that the present Leader of the Opposition has taken certain steps with regard to the progressivity of the tax system, so I do not have to outline that for Liberal Members opposite.

Canadians, therefore, have never had a version of universality in which the theory and the reality are absolutely the same. For example, the old age exemption in the income tax system and the child exemption are theoretically universal, but in fact benefit only those with enough income to pay taxes. Those obviously who are below the taxable income level do not benefit.

When one looks at the program, obviously care has to be taken. There are Canadians who have planned their future. They are retired, close to retirement or hope to retire. They would fit one of those three categories. There has been a commitment made by the people of Canada through subsequent governments that those plans remain in place. It is for that reason that I say I have no intention of eroding that social contract.

Surely there can be only one workable definition of universality that is also consistent with the principle of fairness, that is, that all individuals in the group designated for assistance should receive benefits. At the same time, however, the value of those benefits should surely be greatest for those with the greatest need and least for those whose needs are the least.

I say to the House, and I am simply repeating what the Prime Minister said, that we do not contemplate means tests. I think the definition of a means test is best brought to mind when one recalls the time when we had those types of tests in the country. They were described not as a means test, but the meanest test. That obviously is not progressive social policy.

### *The Address—Mr. J. Epp*

We are contemplating no trade-off between social and fiscal responsibility. I can give no better proof than what appeared in the Agenda for Economic Renewal, and I quote:

Social responsibility dictates that wherever possible, and to a greater extent than is the case today, scarce resources should be diverted to those in greatest need. Fiscal responsibility suggests that Government expenditures must be allocated to provide immediate employment opportunities and better ensure sustained growth.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Charest):** Order. The Hon. Member's time is up. Questions or comments?

**Ms. Mitchell:** Mr. Speaker, I have two questions for the Minister. I congratulate him on his new post. He certainly showed today that at least he is a philosopher. What most people would like to know is, what will be the practical application of this philosophy?

My first question goes back to the point that he made with regard to strengthening the role of the family. Is he in favour of maintaining and also increasing family allowances, particularly in view of the great increase in Canada of single parents, many of them mothers raising children on their own with very low incomes, very often on welfare, and the number of marginal income families with children? Also, there are the millions of people who are unemployed who have children. That is my first question.

The second question has to do with benefits for older people. I am very glad to see the Hon. Stanley Knowles in the Chamber.

**Some Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Ms. Mitchell:** The Minister will recall that for many, many years Mr. Knowles advocated pension reform, particularly for those in the 60 to 65 age group. We support the idea of increasing benefits for widows and widowers in this group. As Mr. Knowles often asked, why should this be based on marital status? I asked the Minister whether this is only being targeted to married people or those who were formerly married. What about single people, particularly single older women in the 60 to 65 age group who are suffering greatly in this country?

**Mr. Epp (Provencher):** Mr. Speaker, I thank the Hon. Member for the question. From philosophy I was obviously going to go to practical expressions of what we intend to do. If the Hon. Member has read the Throne Speech, which I am sure she has done every night because it is good reading, she will know about the initiatives on the spousal allowance which we intend to bring forward. I take from her comments that the New Democratic Party is going to support that Bill. I thank her for that initiative.

We are addressing the very question that she put forward, and I thank her for the question. The gist of the first question had to do with family allowances and family benefits, the total family benefits package. We have to look at family allowances, the tax exemption per child as well as the child tax credit. If I understood the question correctly, the bias or the tilting that