

# HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, February 4, 1985

The House met at 11 a.m.

● (1105)

## GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

### OLD AGE SECURITY ACT

#### MEASURE TO AMEND

**Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare)** moved that Bill C-26, an Act to amend the Old Age Security Act, be read the second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs.

He said: Mr. Speaker, it is with a great deal of pride that I rise to speak on second reading of Bill C-26, an Act to amend the Old Age Security Act. This Bill will always have special significance for me in that it is the first piece of social policy legislation that I, as Minister of National Health and Welfare representing the Government of Canada, have the opportunity to present to the House. This Bill will correct a very serious social problem which has long concerned myself and almost all Members of the House of Commons.

The Bill before us today will extend the protection of the spouse's allowance program to all widows and widowers between the ages of 60 and 64 regardless of the age of their spouse at death. This proposal was a firm commitment made to the people of Canada during the last election campaign. It was formally enunciated in the Speech from the Throne in November. I am pleased that the Government of Canada is fulfilling another of its election promises this morning.

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

**Mr. Epp (Provencher):** The group I am referring to today represents approximately 85,000 Canadians who are widowed and between the eligible ages which I have already announced. It is important to note as well that the vast majority, an estimated 72,000 of the 85,000 who are eligible, are widowed women. I do not think there is a more important cause to which the House of Commons can address itself than the financial situation which these people are now in. This legislation does not and cannot consider the separation, sense of loss or loneliness which these people experience. Those highly personal conditions can be addressed only by individuals interacting with those people. I believe that, within the economic restraints of the country, it is incumbent on us as legislators to address the economic realities these people face.

Since coming into office the Government has had to face up to the very sad fact that the state of finances of the Government of Canada were in even worse shape than we had been led to believe. As the Right Hon. Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) has told Canadians, tough measures will be required to reduce a deficit which has been allowed to skyrocket over the past decade.

However, we cannot and will not allow a very vulnerable segment of Canada's near elderly population to continue to suffer because of circumstances completely beyond their control. There is an urgent need which has been consistently identified by present and past Members of the House of Commons as well as other members of society. Low-income widowed persons aged 60 to 64 do not have many of the options available to most of us. For instance, the vast majority of the persons who will benefit from this Bill are women who have been financial dependants for most, if not all, of their lives. They did not question this financial dependence because society deemed it appropriate. Societal norms dictated that the husband would enter the labour force and earn the money while the wife stayed in the home and performed the unpaid role of mother, housekeeper, companion, nurse, guidance counsellor and community worker—the list is endless. If the wife did take a job it was most often as a secondary earner to supplement the family budget.

I believe that the Bill before us today recognizes that contribution in part. I know that one cannot quantify that contribution in financial terms. So often in our society we want to put a financial value on service or work. No matter what Members may feel about the Bill with regard to whether it goes far enough, I think they would agree that the contribution these people have made to our society goes beyond financial measure. All of us realize that today is but a small recognition of the contribution that they have made to each one of us.

● (1110)

While there will be men who benefit from this proposal, there is no denying that poverty is largely a woman's problem and that widows in particular are among the poorest. These women have held down numerous responsible jobs throughout their adult lives and are more experienced and capable than many people are after spending 40 years in the paid labour force.

Let's not kid ourselves: in most instances, the 60 to 64-year old widow is not the one the personnel manager will hire. Why hire someone who might have only a few years until retirement while there are other young and perhaps better educated people competing for job openings available today? Therefore society must show compassion for these near elderly widows.