

Adjournment Debate

per cent per month. The licensing of thousands of such lenders and inspection of their affairs present an enormous administrative workload for the Department of Insurance. Nevertheless, licensing is available and the department is prepared to use its best efforts in processing any such requests as quickly as possible. This would provide interim relief for such institutions pending adoption of the legislative proposals to which I have alluded.

SOCIAL SECURITY—REQUEST FAMILY ALLOWANCE PROGRAM
RETAIN PRINCIPLE OF UNIVERSALITY

Mr. Bill Blaikie (Winnipeg-Birds Hill): Mr. Speaker, following up on my question of November 5 concerning the government's intentions with regard to the universality of the family allowance program, I would like at this point to give several reasons why we believe it is so important to maintain universality, and then invite the parliamentary secretary's response to my arguments.

Universal programs such as those we now have in education, pensions, health care, and family support, that is, family allowances, are not just techniques for distributing benefits to individuals in our society. They are a statement about what kind of society we are. Universality states that, as a society, we put a high priority on some benefits such as education, health, support for our elders and family life, and that we are prepared to support these things out of the general wealth of the community because it is as important to the so-called poor that the so-called rich have their health, for example, as it is to the so-called rich that the so-called poor are looked after. This is a view which reinforces our view of Canadian society as a community and not just a collection of wealthy and needy individuals.

People should receive benefits simply because they are people, and because we belong to each other. Universal programs as such are not to be seen as welfare programs or as ways of redistributing wealth per se. This is why the government's apparent intention to de-universalize the family allowance program, or to do away with it altogether in order to make for more effective income redistribution, is such a serious, practical and conceptual error.

It is a dangerous conceptual error because it sets up all universal programs for the same criticism, although from another angle in other cases. For instance, in the case of universal education programs, these could be criticized for redistributing wealth upwards, as it is the children of the affluent who use the education system more than others. However, we still say that education should be universally available.

The fact that the gap between rich and poor has become even wider rather than narrower cannot be blamed on universal programs but, rather, on the fact that we still have not seen a fair tax system come into being in this country.

● (2210)

Third, the government's apparent intention is a dangerous practical error, as in practice there would be very little likelihood that those who would supposedly benefit from these changes would see any net improvements in their general welfare. The open agenda of this government is to save money. Therefore, money received through increased child tax credits, for instance, is likely to be lost or reduced through eliminated family allowances or through some other re-shuffling of the same money. Money may simply be redistributed, for instance, from women to men, as many women depend on the family allowance program for their sole source of income.

There are those, I realize, who are hard-pressed to criticize the government's apparent move toward selectivity in social programs, as the argument about targeting money more effectively to those who need it most appeals to our charitable instincts, but this assumes that funds available for social programs have reached their limit and that the status quo is it. We in the New Democratic Party do not accept this argument.

It is the counsel of despair, and we advise the minister to count upon the good will, the generosity, and the sense of the common good which Canadians have in abundance, and seek ways of closing the gap between the rich and the poor, which actually increase government revenue in this vital area of programming, and not just play around with the limits of the budget given him by his colleagues at the Treasury Board. I challenge him—in this case the parliamentary secretary on his behalf—to commit the department to this end and to guarantee, should the government go ahead with this bad mistake, that at the very least all money saved on the one hand will be put back into social programs on the other, whatever they may be, and I do not mean expensive campaign promises.

Mr. Stan Schellenberger (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Winnipeg-Birds Hill (Mr. Blaikie) has obviously researched his argument very well, and he puts forward a very interesting argument.

Hon. members from both opposition parties are often pressing the minister for a response that the minister does not really want to give at this time, because he has said a number of times that the government is interested in considering potential improvements to the child benefit system, and in that regard we are looking at all the elements: family allowance payments, the child tax credit, and income tax exemptions under the income tax system. If a decision that we want to bring legislation forward to the House is reached, then we will let the House know immediately upon that decision.

I can advise the House that the family allowance and child tax credit programs will continue in 1980 on the same basis they have been applied in 1979, and that the amounts of the benefits will be duly escalated in accordance with increases in the cost of living.

As for the longer term, the minister has already told the House that he is giving serious consideration to improving the child benefit system. Whether or not we conclude that we