

The second question addressed to the minister by the hon. member for Selkirk related to the allegation that Air Canada is forcing non-union personnel to act in the capacity of striking workers. We have been advised that the company is using its supervisory and managerial personnel from the finance branch to carry on the main functions of this branch. To assist in the clerical work relating to these functions, the company has transferred a number of clerks from other departments of their operation. These clerks apparently performed similar types of clerical work in the branches where they normally are employed.

SOCIAL SECURITY—ACTION TO INCREASE PENSIONS FOR THE BLIND

Mr. Jack Marshall (Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe): Mr. Speaker, I hope that the remaining member on the government side will answer me.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): If he does not, I will.

Mr. Marshall: Mr. Speaker, in spite of several questions to the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde) asking him to provide some leadership to the provinces in increasing social benefits to blind persons in Canada, I keep getting the usual answer that the responsibility lies with the provinces. And when I ask the ministers responsible in some provinces, they put the blame on the federal government.

The Blind Persons Act provides for federal sharing, under agreements with the provinces, of 75 per cent of the amount paid in allowances to blind persons 18 years of age and over. I know this and have known it for some time; and I also know, as the minister keeps repeating time and time again, that it is up to the provinces to increase the benefits and that the federal government will pay 75 per cent.

I know a lot of other things, too. I know that since 1963 the maximum monthly allowance has been \$75 and it remains the same ten years later. I know, too, that there are some 1,600 children up to the age of 15 who suffer from congenital eye defects, injuries and infections; that there are some 4,000 between 16 and 39 years of age suffering, too, from these defects, plus degenerative myopia; and I know that there are almost 8,000 citizens between the age of 40 and 64 who suffer from the same defects plus many others, such as retinitis, optic atrophy, diabetes, nephritis, tuberculosis, hypertension, blood vessel disease, tumors, and diseases of the central nervous system. And I know too, Mr. Speaker, that there are almost 8,000 citizens between the ages of 65 and 80 years and over 5,000 citizens over 81 years of age suffering from blindness. Yet the only answer I can get is "It is not our responsibility".

The minister had the opportunity at his widely touted conference with the provincial welfare ministers to bring this complete lack of humane consideration to their attention and to demand that the provinces pay some attention to these unfortunate citizens who are suffering from a lack of funds for buying the special needs and attendant supports they require. They lack these funds because of the rapid increase in the cost of living. But the minister is

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blind to his responsibility in showing the leadership required for demanding a change in the thinking of the levels of government which are responsible for supporting the inequities in the programs under this department.

Not only is he blind to the facts and indicates the inhumanity of his government, but he in his short term of office is suffering from "pass-the-buckism". I must confess the minister has shown more than average capability since he took over the Department of National Health and Welfare, but I ask him to stop and think of the suffering of the blind citizens of Canada. When he again meets with the welfare ministers, presumably in September, I ask that this inequity in social security legislation be treated with human feeling and priority, and that he introduce a program or amendments to the Blind Persons Act, which dates back to 1948, some 25 years, to help these unfortunate Canadian citizens.

Mr. Charles Turner (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Labour): Mr. Speaker, I would like first to address the comment respecting blind persons allowance. Under the federal Blind Persons Act, an allowance of \$75 per month may be granted to blind persons 18 years of age and over. The program is based on a means test, and although the federal government shares in 75 per cent of its cost, it is administered by the province, which determines eligibility and the amount of payment and does not take into account the needs of the individual and his family.

It was because of concern over these and other limitations which are characteristic of this and similar categorical programs that the federal government introduced the Canada Assistance Plan, which came into effect on April 1, 1966. The plan was enacted as a comprehensive and public assistance measure, and the fact of need rather than the cause of need became the important criterion for determining eligibility for assistance.

The Canada Assistance Plan, under agreements with the provinces, enables the federal government to contribute 50 per cent of the cost of assistance and of improving welfare services granted to persons who are in need. The legislation places no ceiling on the rates of assistance to be shared, nor is there any reference in the plan to allowable income. This, in effect, has left the provinces free to set amounts and conditions and to take into account the needs of special groups.

I should also point out that the Canada Assistance Plan legislation includes provisions under which a province may cease to accept applications under the Blind Persons Act and provide assistance to blind persons under its needs-tested social assistance programs. At the present time, five provinces and the Northwest Territories are no longer accepting applications under the act. These provinces are Saskatchewan, Ontario, Alberta, Quebec and British Columbia.

Since many provinces are no longer accepting applications under the act, and because the provinces and territories were given notice that the agreements between them and Canada under the Blind Persons Act are being terminated effective February 1, 1981, there will be no proposals to increase the federal sharing in an amount greater than \$75 per month.