

Old Age Security Act

[Translation]

And the Minister went on to say:

[English]

Even in a period of economic restraint we have an obligation to those who need help most.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, I fully agree with the Minister's statement—we must help the needy even in times of economic restraint.

However, I have one question. Why does the Minister talk about social justice and help for the needy, while seemingly prepared to create an injustice? To my mind, the injustice lies in the exclusion of single persons aged 60 to 65 and of divorced people.

We have been told that we are going through difficult times and that the Government must keep a close watch on expenditures. Of course, we have to keep a close watch on expenditures, we must always do that. But at times like these, the first thing to do is to set priorities. Although the economic prospects are discouraging, money has been found to dress up our Armed Forces in brand new uniforms. This is probably a commendable endeavour, but if we think of those uniforms in terms of the issue we are now debating—excluding single and divorced people from the provisions of this Bill—I would suggest that we have to establish priorities in accordance with needs.

With respect to the military, can we say that the need was real, that the people in our Armed Forces just could not do without new uniforms? Can we say that their need was as real and urgent as those of Canadians aged 60 to 65? What we have to do, Mr. Speaker, is to decide where our priorities lie, who will benefit from our services.

Mr. Speaker, my riding of Westmorland-Kent has a very high rate of unemployment and the entire Province of New Brunswick does not fare any better: ours is the third highest rate of unemployment in Canada. Why am I mentioning the unemployment rate? Simply because I was reminded, when the relevant data were published over the week-end, that once again unemployment had gone up in Canada. If I insist on this, it is not only because the general public in my area—the people back home, as I should say—are affected, but because a particular group, namely those who are 60 years old and over, are most severely affected. These people have much more difficulty finding jobs because whenever they apply, employers unfortunately have a tendency to give the preference to less mature people. And because the unemployment rate is very high back home, there are a great many young people looking for jobs, which makes the situation even more difficult for people who are 60 years old and over.

● (1240)

Mr. Speaker, we must help all these people who are 60 years old and over. We must see to it that they are not discriminated

against. Mr. Speaker, I should like you and all Hon. Members to answer this question: Who can state positively that single and divorced people have worked less hard for Canada and, therefore, have contributed less to the economy of this country?

That is a question we must ask ourselves, Mr. Speaker. Are there any good and valid reasons to exclude these people? We must see to it not only that the relevant benefits apply to all people 60 years of age and over, but that we speed up the adoption of this bill and make it effective before September 1985.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would like to take up the statement made by the Hon. Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) to the effect that even in this time of economic restraint, we have an obligation to provide help to those who need it most.

Mr. Ricardo Lopez (Châteauguay): Mr. Speaker, I too am pleased to say a few words today about Bill C-26. I am really surprised to see our Liberal friends launching such an irresponsible attack against our Bill.

Mr. Speaker, it goes without saying that I too would like these provisions to apply to all needy people, but it is better to help categories of people such as those most in need than not helping anybody. We have been in office for four months now and we began by gradually helping the most underprivileged Canadians. It is not as if we were helping everybody, of course, but the Liberals did even worse since they did not help anybody. So why are they now making such a fuss over the fact that we want to help a group of people who are among the most needy in our society, those between the ages of 60 and 64? If we had adequate resources, I would be the first one to stand up and say that we ought to help all others as well, even those over age 64. I wish we could help people of 50 or more if it were possible. We are doing what we can, and I think it is better than nothing at all. In twenty years, the Liberals did not even cover half the distance we have gone in four months. It seems to me they will have to show more flexibility and agree with us on that point.

Earlier today, one of my colleagues brought up the case of widowers who have remarried and then separated again. Such people do not really belong to the group of people covered in this Bill. In many such cases, they may have additional income or get matrimony allowances. In other words, their situation is different, as are their needs. I readily endorse Bill C-26 because I am convinced that it is a worthwhile measure which will help a group of our fellow Canadians who are really in need. Better to help them than not helping anybody at all. I support this Bill without any reservation and I would suggest that our friends in the Opposition are shirking their responsibilities when they speak out against it.