

*Adjournment Debate*

Hon. Prime Minister regarding Bill C-26. I recall that at the time, the legislation had not been tabled. It had been announced in the Throne Speech, and the economic statement that the Canadian Government intended to extend the spouse's allowance to single people but that unfortunately, it would only apply to widows and widowers, which was discriminating against older people who are single, separated or divorced and who have the same needs. I would like to quote the answer given by the Right Hon. Prime Minister:

I can inform the Hon. Member that our objective is to help those people in our society who are most in need, and I think that is the basic purpose of any decent social program in this country.

Mr. Speaker, we believe there is a real need for such measures among people between 60 and 64.

Mr. Speaker, at that time, the Prime Minister agreed to my request that the spouse's allowance should be extended to single people who are in need and whom he mentioned in his answer. He made no distinction between widows, widowers, single, divorced and separated persons. At that time, the Prime Minister agreed to the statement of the Canadian Welfare Council in its report of March 1985, where it said about the poverty level:

Single older people, those who are living alone or in a household where they have no relatives, have a greater chance of being poor. Recent data indicate that about 56 per cent of them, or 434,000, are poor. Almost half of women who are heads of single parent families live at poverty level.

Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister had indicated at the time that the aim of his Government was to provide help to all Canadian men and women between 60 and 64 years of age who needed it the most, without differentiating between widows and widowers. What has happened, Mr. Speaker? Something entirely different. The Minister of National Health and Welfare has introduced a Bill which unfortunately restricted to widows and widowers the spouse allowance program which made it possible for these people who, year after year, had worked, paid income taxes, raised children and contributed to society, to get off welfare. This Conservative Government penalizes a great many Canadians, the vast majority of them women, simply because they have remained single or have been forced to separate. There is no more pitiful case than that of the poor woman abandoned by her husband and who must raise alone five or six children, provide them with a good education, and who is told, at 60, that she is not eligible to the spouse allowance because she could no longer stand her husband. I feel sorry for the Hon. Member who will have to deliver such a message in his office should this legislation not be amended, Mr. Speaker.

Last week, I talked about 80,000 people in need, according to the Department's own estimate, but the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) questioned those figures at that time. I have them here, Mr. Speaker, and I say again that 80,000 needy persons between the ages of 60 and 64 are not

being taken care of. Of this number, 37,000 separated persons will not be looked after and 45,000 single persons will be penalized if the Government maintains its position and does not revert to its former response as given to me on November last by the Prime Minister.

Government Members often stated that it is a matter of money, that they have no choice because of the deficit. But no Conservative Member ever rose to question the Government's financial capabilities when it became known that the Western Accord would cost \$2.5 billion. Even they did not know what that accord was all about but they did applaud it all the same. Not one of them suggested that our deficit was too high. No one stood against changing the colour of the armed forces' uniforms because it would cost \$56 million. I repeat that no Conservative Member opposed such actions or mentioned the deficit for that matter.

• (1810)

But when it comes to helping people in need, those who live on \$430 a month, Mr. Speaker, they say that the cupboard is bare. Those are not wealthy people, Mr. Speaker, and the proposed increase would only provide them with \$536 monthly. Such an increase is not likely to make them millionaires but the Conservative government is opposed to it. As far as they are concerned, they are only prepared to help one group of the population.

I did mention earlier that this government, the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson), the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) and the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) were indeed considering the costs of our social programs. The Conseil du patronat and spokesmen for the multinationals have been talking about the deficit, claiming that social programs must be watered down because they cost too much money, Mr. Speaker, but nobody talks about tax shelters.

There are tax benefits for people who contribute to Registered Retirement Savings Plans. But the head of a family or a mother who earns \$35,000—or even if both work every week and earn about \$40,000—cannot set aside 10 or 20 per cent of their income to contribute to an RRSP and reduce the tax load. Poor people cannot afford to do that. It is always the same class of citizens who can take advantage of it.

Mr. Speaker, I am anxious to hear the reply of the Parliamentary Secretary. Perhaps she will tell me that, as we are speaking, the Prime Minister has reconsidered the decision he mentioned in his first answer. He told me that elderly people between ages 60 and 64 are most in need, that those are the people he wanted to help without discriminating against people living alone and those who are separated.

**Mrs. Gabrielle Bertrand (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Health and Welfare):** Mr. Speaker, the proposal to extend spouse's allowance to all widowed individu-