

Supply

points to the provinces and stay out of other people's business, which would be the constitutional way of operating.

[*English*]

Mr. Walker: Madam Speaker, the opposition member confused about three or four very important issues in the same speech. Let us take them one at a time.

First, the federal government has given the provinces every opportunity to design their social programs as they wish. The only condition the federal government is putting in Bill C-76 is the condition that there is no residency requirement attached to social assistance.

We think that the provinces will respond very positively and will develop some very innovative programming. As I explained in my speech on some of the barriers under the Canada assistance plan, which has been sort of the cornerstone of the Canadian social assistance program and social policy for the last 30 years, the time has come to change it. We feel very confident that the provinces will do the right thing and develop some very innovative programming. One of the things I mentioned was the school lunch and breakfast programs, which are not facilitated under the present arrangements under the Canada assistance plan. There will be other opportunities.

[*Translation*]

One expression in the text is crucial to this debate, and that is "mutual consent".

[*English*]

We use those words very carefully and very purposely to indicate to the provinces that we are not about to impose new conditions on their social programs and that if a future government wishes to do so this would require entirely new legislation.

The Minister of Human Resources Development will be approaching the provinces, as is stated in the act. I want to say to the House that in my short history as a parliamentarian and my longer history as a student of Canadian politics, I cannot remember an act that mandates a minister to go out and consult. This was not just said in a speech in the House of Commons but is in fact part of the legislation.

I suspect this is being taken very seriously by the minister himself, as he has indicated in the House, and that by mutual consent there may be programs emerging and conditions or statements. However, this is up to the minister to discuss with the provinces. We have simply said that at this time the conditions that are stated are those that are in the act.

In terms of the responsibility the federal government has for closing hospitals, we cannot have it both ways. We cannot ask the federal government to sponsor and finance but to leave

people alone and then second guess whether provinces are closing hospitals or cutting back on doctors or cutting back on nurses. These are very serious decisions, but they are the decisions of the provincial government.

• (1225)

I will use the example of Alberta, where everybody is up in arms about the government closing rural hospitals. They often forget that it was the same government that opened those hospitals in the first place. The province has the responsibility for its construction programs and for the infrastructure it puts into health care. If mistakes were made in the past, I do not think federal politicians should second guess them. Those things are in the provincial domain, the construction of hospitals and the delivery of health care.

I say this in the context that the cutbacks that will come into effect in two years represent 3 per cent of the total provincial revenues of Canada.

We in the finance committee listened to many groups intervening on the question of federal funding for social and health policy. We have been most conscious that the amount of funds will not be devastating to the poor of the country. We are confident that with the two years of warning, one year of no cuts and another year of half the cuts, most provinces will have the revenue capacity and the tax points and the space needed to generate the money to make sure the programs continue, particularly those west of Ontario that have a balanced budget. I believe seven out of ten are getting close to a balanced budget. However, they have to decide on their own which are the best ways to finance these programs and what the priorities are.

There is no province I can think of that would think of abandoning the poor as a priority. I am confident these issues will be taken care of.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Rocheleau (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague, who is undoubtedly an honourable man, as a Canadian citizen elected by his constituents, whether, when he considers the demands of the people of Quebec as embodied by their government, he feels that these are the demands of a distinct society within the Canadian federation or that these are merely the vengeful demands of a province that refuses to conform, and above all, to be treated like the other provinces?

I would be interested to hear what the hon. member has to say about Quebec's historic claims as opposed to the other concept that includes all that, where our aim, at least within the framework of Canadian Confederation, is to be a distinct society in Canada.