

*Old Age Security Act*

[Translation]

**Hon. Marc Lalonde (Minister of National Health and Welfare):** First of all, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank most sincerely all members of this House whose co-operation throughout this day has made it possible to examine in a serious, yet expeditious way a bill which a great many Canadians must have felt was long in coming.

I am particularly grateful to the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) who has gracefully surrendered the hour to which he was entitled under our regulations, both now and at the time reserved for the consideration of private bills. I wish to thank also the hon. member for Bellechasse (Mr. Lambert) for his remarks and the interest he shows in this whole question. As he indicated, this is another step in our way to treat and deal with our senior citizens. Surely the government would like to go still further and more quickly, and if its possibilities were similar to those of the opposition party, and particularly to those of the opposition parties which do not have any chance of ever forming the government in the near future, it would probably make similar propositions. However, as a government, we must consider the available resources in the country at any given moment. The record of the Liberal party, as I said at the outset of this debate, and the record of this government shows the concern, the importance we have attached to the aged in our overall social policy.

I recall that only two years ago, I think, the total amount earmarked for old age security reached slightly over \$2 billion. Now, for the current financial year, the amount which will be set aside for this purpose will total \$4 billion, which would mean that we will have practically doubled the old age security benefits in the very short time of barely two or three years.

The bill before us has a limited objective. That objective was stated very specifically when the right hon. Prime Minister announced the bill during the last electoral campaign. We committed ourselves to helping those couples who must live on one pension only, that is, that of the spouse who is retired. That is a real problem and many representations were made to the government in this regard at various times. We are not attempting to extend universal pension from the age of 60, or to lower the pensionable age. Instead, we are trying to solve a specific problem a real problem, that of the couple who must live on a single pension. That is the problem this bill is attempting to solve.

The other much broader matter which several hon. members brought up, and which concerns the status of single people and widows, is more closely related to the guaranteed income in Canada.

[English]

Indeed, it is not only a question of old age pension; it is a question of what kind of support is going to be provided the people of this country in need, whatever their age and condition.

The hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander) asked this morning what were the priorities of the government. It is too bad he has not read the working document that the government published over two years ago. Those priorities are spelled out in black and white. To make it

[The Acting Speaker (Mr. Penner).]

even easier for members opposite, the priorities and the propositions of the government are spelled out in dark ink in the text. It should be easy to read. Those propositions are spelled out quite clearly.

● (1640)

Our priorities are spelled out in terms of establishing a guaranteed income program to provide an income support program for those who are unable to work or who are unable to find work, and to provide an income supplementation program for the working poor. These are the priorities. We have been working on these for two years with the provinces, and have started implementing a good part of these programs, especially with regard to income support by increasing old age security and improving the Canada Pension Plan and the Quebec Pension Plan, by indexing benefits, and tripling family allowances. We have taken those steps.

Not only have we been holding discussions with the provinces over a period of two or three years but we have brought in reforms and have made progress in respect of social security.

Certainly there are improvements which could be made, but I might say to those who have asked today that we just lower the age to 60 tomorrow that the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) filed an answer to a question in this House a few weeks ago in which he showed how much this would cost. It would cost about \$3 billion, merely for the level of pensions we are talking about at the present time. I am not talking about the \$300 or \$350 mentioned by some hon. members but rather the guaranteed program. Since a good part of this money will be distributed on a universal basis the question that arises is whether this is the real priority we should have in looking after the needs of the people of this country. My answer is no, for a very good reason. If we were to buy this argument now we would be using several hundred millions of dollars, as a matter of fact several billion dollars, to put money in the hands of people who do not necessarily need it.

When we are asked what our priorities are, I say that they are not in terms of further universal programs but rather are in terms of selective programs. This is what the guaranteed income approach is.

**Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** Mr. Speaker, I wonder whether the minister would answer a question. While he is speaking in these terms may I ask him what is the logic by which the government decides that a woman aged 62 who is married is to be covered under the old age security program whereas another woman who is 62 and a widow or a spinster must wait for the guaranteed annual income?

**Mr. Lalonde:** I thought I had answered the hon. member's question earlier. The logic of it simply is that when you have a couple one member of which is forced to retire at age 65 it would be unfair to limit the benefits to one person.

**Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** What about the one person living alone on nothing?