Old Age Security Act

to generate the wealth to provide these benefits without interruption. We must also ensure additional benefits, such as a universal pension for everyone over the age of 60 and improved pension benefits to ensure that everyone lives above the poverty line. In that regard we should ultimately be aiming at something like a guaranteed annual wage. Of course, that guaranteed annual wage must not discourage people who have saved for their retirement. It must protect them at the same time as protecting those people who need help.

Parliament should be aiming at all of these things, Mr. Speaker, but they will all depend on the generation of more wealth in the country. Today we should be applauding the Government's move for improving the spouse's allowance benefits. All Members of the House should be dedicating themselves to getting the economy moving again, getting people back to work again, and turning people into taxpayers rather than welfare recipients so that they can generate the tax money in this country to provide for the things we are talking about today—a much better social security system and social safety network in the future.

● (1130)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Since we have been debating this Bill for eight hours, speeches are now limited to ten minutes with no questions or comments afterwards.

Mr. Stan J. Hovdebo (Prince Albert): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to Bill C-26, an Act to amend the Old Age Security Act. The Act extends the spouse's allowance to low-income widows and widowers between 60 and 65 years of age. Single and divorced people in that age group are still excluded, according to the Bill.

While the New Democratic Party will support this legislation, I think our members have indicated a number of weaknesses in the Act which we hope the Government will address when the Bill goes to the committee. The main weakness is one which has been well documented and presented to the House. The benefits are extended to a very arbitrarily defined group. Their application is not universal at all and there is no intention for it to be universal. The Bill does nothing for low-income people between the ages of 60 and 65 who were never married or who are divorced. The fact that this legislation discriminates against a certain group is unacceptable in our society and this matter should be dealt with in the committee so that the Bill can be changed before it is enacted into law.

The other weakness that has been pointed out to the House is that if those in this particular age group are suffering financially at this time, then this Bill should be put into effect immediately instead of September, 1985, if it can be passed quickly. The fact that people need this help now means that they should receive the benefits of this legislation as soon as it can be passed. Therefore, we would like to see this legislation become effective immediately on the date of its enactment. If we recognize the need there is no reason why we should not act quickly.

The measures in this Bill are partly a response to the recommendations of the Task Force on Pension Reform which reported in December, 1984. Our member on that commission was Ted Miller, a member in the previous Parliament. He also made a minority report. He recommended expanding the general public program of Old Age Security, the Canada Pension Plan and Quebec Pension Plan by making them available at age 60. I believe our ultimate goal should be to have a universal program for all people.

Although some members of the Liberal Party in the House agree that such a change would be beneficial and should be implemented, the previous Liberal Government made no attempt to implement any of the recommendations brought before it by the Pension Reform Committee in 1983. Except for the two-stage, $50 per month increase in the guaranteed income supplement, the previous Government was content to leave pension changes to those that did not help lower income people but definitely helped the upper income groups in Canada. We support this Bill and are willing to discuss it in committee where we might be able to convince the Government to make some changes so that it will be less discriminatory.

Pensions have a very interesting history in Canada. The first old age pension legislation in Canada was introduced during a minority government in 1926. At that time the real impetus behind that particular move for pensions was instigated by J. S. Woodsworth who was the Labour Member of Parliament for Winnipeg North Centre. The measure was opposed by the Conservatives in the House back in 1926, then blocked by the Liberals and the Conservatives in the Senate.

Following the election of that year, when it became a campaign issue during the election, it was reintroduced by the King Government and passed the House and the Senate with very little difficulty. It is very interesting to note that that particular pension was $20 per month and very strictly means tested.

That particular period of history is very interesting as far as social welfare legislation in Canada is concerned and I would commend members in the House and other Canadians to read it. It shows the ability of one determined man or a group of seven Members in the House who were able to change the direction of social welfare legislation in Canada to a direction that has not changed perceptibly since that time. We have added to that legislation on several occasions.

The CCF conducted a considerable amount of policy discussion and development. When Stanley Knowles was elected in 1942, he immediately took up the responsibility of his predecessor from Winnipeg North Centre, J.S. Woodsworth, and called for pensions as a fundamental right and free from the humiliating means test. In 1952, ten years later, after considerable pressure from the CCF in the House, the Government introduced universal old age security and made it payable at age 70.

I am reviewing this history because since 1926 until now we have made inroads into taking the responsibility for senior citizens, recognizing their contribution to our country and that