

Family Allowances

deep desire by the public for firm, comprehensive policies to cure "stagflation" which, however you define that word, means we have 8 per cent inflation with 5.5 per cent unemployment. Because the public is not getting firm policies from the government, a sense of disillusionment is becoming pronounced in Canada today. This sense of disillusionment with the political process is a far more important question than the government realizes.

The family allowances bill before us is a reflection of the reactive response that so characterizes the government, and it puts me, I am frank to admit, in a quandary. I am very much opposed to increasing public dependency on the government, yet I can see how desperately the poor and middle-class sections of society need to be helped as a result of runaway inflation.

This summer I travelled by car across Canada from Alberta to P.E.I., an exercise I recommend to all members of parliament as distinct from weekly air trips during which you neither see nor feel the fabric of Canada. I talked to many Canadians. I could see just how much an improvement in the family allowance level would mean to them. This experience helped me to resolve the struggle within myself, of fighting big government on the one hand and having concern for the practicalities of helping people who definitely need to be helped.

But, Mr. Speaker, let not members of the government hold up their heads in pride at what they are doing in presenting us with this bill. Let them not think that a \$4 to \$6 monthly hike in family allowances is the answer to hardship caused by inflation. Let them not think that justice is being delivered to the Canadian people, because this bill, the pension bills and the subsidies that have constituted the government's response to the inflation crisis all deal with secondary problems.

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While we debate family allowances as a supposed cure for our problems, the fundamental problem of income distribution remains obscured. A bold, new social program for the seventies is desperately needed, Mr. Speaker, not a tinkering with the family allowance system of the forties. And if there is any doubt about this, ask the people of Edmonton-Strathcona right on their doorsteps, as I did. Ask the demonstrators who came to parliament this afternoon to protest against the gouging of the public through high food prices. Ask the five million Canadians living below the poverty line if an additional \$4 to \$6 a month per child will lift them out of poverty.

The social security system in Canada today is in chaos. The whole system, at all government levels, costs Canadians more than \$6 billion a year, yet it has not significantly alleviated poverty let alone eliminated it. There are five million Canadians living below the poverty line. The special Senate Committee on Poverty reported that "poverty is the great social issue of our time". For the chronically unemployed, the unskilled, the poorly educated, the disadvantaged, infirm, aged, one-parent families or inhabitants of depressed areas, poverty has become a way of life, an ugly subculture within Canadian society.

These are the people who have been most hurt by the government's economic slowdown and inflation. Generally, they have inferior educational, medical, cultural and

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information services and lack the skill or knowledge to make use of many of the facilities available to the general public. The greatest tragedy is the children, for they grow up in a cycle of poverty. The welfare system is itself a block to improving the lot of the poor because social programs are not co-ordinated among the three levels of government; there is confusion and intergovernmental ill-will.

The focus of government help is on the casualties of our system instead of the prevention of problems. And to compound this, the increasing welfare costs are squeezing money for prevention programs. People on welfare do not have the sympathy of Canadians today. This is because the government has emphasized social assistance programs so much that the line has been crossed from protection to reliance. The welfare system was designed originally as a supplement to the economic system. Now it has become a political tool of the government, used by the government to bail it out of political emergencies. The government, which brought in restrictive economic policies in the first place, tries to help people by adding social programs such as family allowances which eat up tax dollars and add to the working man's burden. This philosophy is wrong and is producing an overdependence on government by people who should be able to take care of themselves.

The unemployment insurance program frequently provides excessive benefits, particularly in cases where people have other sources of income. What is especially offensive to Canadians is that there are tens of thousands of people who find themselves in the position where taking a job at or near minimum wages provides them with less cash disposable income than they can get from the welfare program. This is certainly unfair to the working poor and contributes to the feelings of alienation in our society. Unless courageous action is taken, the future will bring spiralling costs necessary to prop up an ineffective welfare system. The result will be dissatisfaction and bitterness among both those who give and those who receive. And perhaps worst of all, the element of compassion toward those genuinely in need will erode away. Then our society truly will be poor.

Government is better able to help those who cannot help themselves when it creates an economic climate that enables employable people to help themselves. It is not the government but the initiative of free men and women that enables people to work out their own destinies. The human spirit is best served by encouraging people to be dependent on themselves rather than on the government. This is the route to a life of human dignity for the poor, not perpetuation of government handouts as we have before us in the family allowance program.

Therefore, Canada's goal must be the creation of greater income-earning potential among the poor themselves. When this principle is recognized, there will be public support for more manpower programs to train the unskilled and retrain those in declining industries, and for more adult education leading to employment in expanding industrial projects. A better step toward this goal is to increase the minimum wage rather than try to advance family allowances. Thus people are given money for work done, not subsidized for work not done.