

*Guaranteed Minimum Income*

During the past years, we have become more and more aware of the persistence of poverty in Canada. If we are not more sensibilized to the problem, perhaps it is partly due to the fact that we keep believing that poverty means full deprivation. In other words, the threshold of poverty has often been considered as the level of minimum physical sustenance, providing one with just enough to be able to live and work.

Human needs, however, also involve many conventional or social features related to the changes in the way of life of the community. Obviously, these features change with time. For instance, more and more people are now becoming aware of the fact that many people are poor because they are deprived of income, of job opportunities, of the environment and the self-respect, which are considered normal in the community. Poverty should therefore be considered as a fact related to the average standard of living, which is constantly developing. This, however, does not preclude isolated cases of utter destitution.

The tentative evaluation of poverty which appears in the fifth annual Report of the Economic Council of Canada shows that about four million Canadians may be considered as living at or below the poverty level. Preliminary estimates for 1967 involve 840,000 families and 586,000 single persons, adding up to some 3,850,000 people.

The data provided by the Canada Assistance Plan and the Old Age Security Program show that out of this number, almost two million people are now receiving an income supplement based on a means or needs test, or an income supplement to the old age security pensions. In spite of that, their income remains below the poverty level.

• (5:20 p.m.)

We can therefore conclude from the Economic Council figures that most of the remaining two million persons belong to families of small wage-earners who belong to the labour force but whose income is below the poverty level.

We will therefore note that there are now in Canada more than four million men, women and children who live in poverty compared to their fellow citizens. Some, if not all of them, are inadequately housed, fed, undereducated, deprived of leisure and frustrated even in their own sense of dignity. Most of them can be fitted into one of three main categories, the first of which includes the people on welfare.

[Mr. Guilbault.]

Mr. Speaker, the term "welfare" has become a bitter one for more than a million persons who rely on the system. Benefits vary considerably from one province to another, but in practically all cases, they fail to meet the actual needs of the recipients. People in receipt of relief feel stigmatized. They are often fearful and scornful of the local welfare officials because of the great power they wield and because of their often irrevocable decisions. That category is made up mostly of mothers without husbands either as a result of desertion, death or divorce. Disabled persons, a great number of whom are totally unable to fend for themselves, also belong to this category.

Another class belonging to this category are the older people. The economic situation of the aged in Canada is amply evidenced by the fact that 52 per cent, or almost 750,000 of those on welfare, are eligible, either partially or fully, to the guaranteed minimum income.

For a good many of those elderly people the guaranteed income supplement does not provide decent living conditions. And yet most of them cannot get the advantages provided by the Canada Assistance Plan. It should be pointed out that a relatively small number of elderly people who are living in a state of poverty receive some supplementary assistance through the provinces.

Those I call the working poor are another category of needy people. More than two million people fall into this category. A good many of them note bitterly that in spite of all their efforts to succeed in supporting themselves their lot is actually worse than that of their fellow-citizens who are not working and get welfare payments. Those people sometimes earn their low income from marginal industries, from jobs on farms, from work done as woodcutters or as fishermen. It may be also that they live in economically underprivileged areas where they can find part-time or low-paying jobs only. They are also found in big cities with a very high cost of living and where they manage somehow to make both ends meet with an income in the neighborhood of the minimum salary.

But the motion presented by the hon. member for Portneuf does not provide for any benefit for those two million people who live, in spite of the fact that they work, in a state of poverty. I should like to add, in this connection, that this motion is not that much different from existing provincial welfare schemes.