

Twenty-four hours from now the provincial legislature in British Columbia will be hearing the budget of the Minister of Finance for the province of British Columbia. It will be interesting to note, as a result of rumours coming to us now, whether the speech she has just given would not be better given to her colleagues in British Columbia than to this House.

Mr. Rey Pagtakhan (Winnipeg North): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on Bill C-61, an act to provide borrowing authority for the fiscal year commencing on April 1, 1992.

In the ten minutes allotted to me I would like to speak not of what was in the budget but of what the budget did not contain.

This borrowing bill asks for \$24.7 billion and an additional \$3.9 billion to cover a shortfall in this current fiscal year. Well, that is money. How the world has come to revolve around the yen, the Deutschmark, the pound and the dollar. It is as if all the hungry mouths, empty lives, broken hearts and souls have no place in the machinations of the Minister of Finance.

Throughout my time in the House of Commons since 1988 I have tried by whatever means possible to convince the members opposite to open their minds to the larger picture. A country cannot be healthy if one million children live in poverty, and jobs and businesses are being lost as never before. This will only continue with the budget just brought forward by this government.

Society is like a web, everything is attached to something else. In order for it to function as a whole each strand of the web must be strong. A child is one strand in the web. For a child to have the best chance of growing up healthy the child must be born healthy. Yet in Canada 21,000 babies are born underweight each year. This often leads to a lifetime of illness and lost productivity potential.

Why are children born underweight? The main cause is that the mothers are under-fed. Feed the mother and feed the child. A healthy child will probably grow into a healthy adult, a sound citizen, a taxpayer and a parent to more healthy children.

For \$500,000, which is the amount of money this government is spending on promoting its child benefit

package, 1,234 needy pregnant women could have been given prenatal nutritional counselling at \$45 per month for the duration of their pregnancy. The result would be many more Canadian babies born with normal weights. Our gift to their mothers would be food and our gift to the children would be health. It is a gift justly deserved.

It is said that in times of old when a ship was sinking the captain would yell: "Into the lifeboats, women and children first." Due to the seriousness of this issue I took the time to write a special article that has been published in *The Medical Post* on March 3, 1992. I will refer to it in my comments.

It is time for this government to begin launching such lifeboats. One of the firsts should be a "healthy babies strategy" for Canada.

This strategy would help ensure our babies are healthy at birth by guaranteeing adequate food and pre-natal counselling for all pregnant women, especially those who are poor.

According to the World Health Organization, a baby should weigh at least 2.5 kilograms when born. Babies below this weight risk ill-health and even a decrease in intelligence. They often suffer disabilities—mental and physical—which shackle them throughout their lives. Respiratory illnesses and brain haemorrhaging are frequent afflictions for these newborns.

The subcommittee on poverty was mandated by Parliament to direct the government in aiding the poor. This subcommittee of Parliament recommended that such a special nutritional supplement program be given during pregnancy, particularly the needy.

Every town, village and city in this country has its own child victims of poverty. Every hospital knows them. They walk through any urban centre. Winnipeg's shopping malls and housing projects will leave a memory of certain sickly, spindly teenagers and children fixed in your mind. I ask: "How many of these children were born underweight and undernourished?"

The cost of these children to the heart of our country cannot be calculated. The cost in dollars is estimated to be millions. Yet the federal health department has not acted on the committee's report although it was obligated to respond by the middle of this month. It has missed the deadline.