

Social Policy

far. One of them is the one we are discussing today. Admittedly it is difficult to explain why a non-pensioned spouse should continue to receive the spouse's allowance when single people in the same conditions were never eligible for that allowance. That is why I suggested on many occasions reducing the age of retirement to 60 and at the same time making retirement optional up to 70. This would go a long way towards solving the problem of the allowance of the spouse who loses his or her pensioned spouse. A number of jobs would also be opened up and could be made available to people drawing unemployment benefits. Any person aged 60 to 70 who is able and wants to work could forego his or her pension and keep working. So optional retirement at 60 would result in lesser outlays for the government than mandatory retirement at 60.

Mr. Speaker, there are now a little more than two million pensioners in Canada with more than half of those in receipt of the guaranteed income supplement. This system of old age security and guaranteed income for people 65 and over is costing the treasury \$4.3 billion. There are now nearly 860,000 people between the ages of 60 and 65.

According to the figures for 1976-77, the average pension is \$180 a month. A quick calculation shows that lowering pension age to 60 would cost close to \$2 billion. But let me quote from the Canadian sociology and anthropology publication to which I referred last February when we were considering Bill C-35. It says that lowering the retirement age to 60—if we accept the reasonable assumption that the current activity rate of people over 65 would be shifted five years back—would open up more than 200,000 jobs for men and 87,000 for women. These figures represent today almost one-third of the Canadian unemployed, according to the latest Statistics Canada survey.

I agree, Mr. Speaker, that allowances must be made when considering these figures because many jobs made vacant in such a way are of a special kind since they are filled by aged workers. But still that would represent a substantial saving in terms of unemployment insurance benefits which would amount to close to \$1 billion or even more. The tax burden of bringing the retirement age down to 60 would be lightened by that much.

Mr. Speaker, I concede that, in view of the difficult economic situation we are now experiencing, such a short-term financial commitment could seriously undermine the budget if we once again had to increase the burden of the debt. This is why I suggest lowering the retirement age on a progressive basis within a certain time scale. That way the financial burden would be spread over several years, which would facilitate things for the government. While conceding that over the last few years there has been real improvement regarding old age security, I take this opportunity to remind you that elderly people are always the most vulnerable to inflation and housing difficulties. Because of the many faceted problems of the

elderly people, it is difficult to put forth a comprehensive solution.

Yet I would urge the government to realize the difficulties these citizens have to overcome. I am aware that lowering to 60 the age of eligibility for the old age security pension raises many issues, the cost factor not being the least of them. Given the present economic situation, it seems to me that gradually reducing the age of eligibility for the old age security pension would be the most appropriate measure. I also believe that in the short run, a social measure such as early eligibility to pensions for certain persons between the ages of 60 and 65 should seriously be considered. And that I wish to explain. A growing number of persons falling in that age category are finding themselves unemployed because they do not have specific qualifications or are unable to get any. Having little or no investment income and being without dependents, these persons must turn to their province's welfare system for help. It seems to me that according to fair and equitable criteria these persons could be allowed to take an early retirement at 60 and start receiving their benefits under old age security. This would be a first step towards the universalization in Canada of an optional retirement income system at the age of 60.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to repeat that the only solution that the government can offer us to correct unfair situations such as those described in the motion presented by the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands (Miss MacDonald) is to introduce as soon as possible a program aimed at bringing down to 60, at least on a gradual basis, the age of eligibility for the old age security pension plan.

Mr. Speaker, I consider the minister to be an honest person and I think that in the heat of the debate her words exceeded her thoughts; so I should like to remind her that, on this side of the House, my party as well as the other parties of the official opposition and the New Democratic Party, we have repeatedly asked for a guaranteed minimum income. I should also like to point out that the government actually promised it during its 1974 campaign, stressing the fact that a guaranteed minimum income program would be set up in the years following that election.

Mr. Speaker, to prove my point, I gleaned several of my interventions in 1974, and more specifically during the month of—I have that in the official report of the debates for December 3, 1974. I asked the government to lower the old age security pension eligibility age from 65 to 60, and to adopt a guaranteed minimum income. As well, in 1977, on two occasions, I asked that a guaranteed minimum income program be set up for all Canadian citizens from 18 to 60 years of age.

So, the minister may want to tell the truth about the matter and tell the people that, unfortunately, it is not that the opposition put obstacles in the way of a guaranteed minimum income but that in all truth, as the hon. member for Winnipeg