

Private Members' Business

[English]

Mr. J.W. Bud Bird (Fredericton—York—Sunbury): Madam Speaker, I compliment the hon. member for Saint-Leonard on the resolution he has placed before the House this afternoon and to say to him that the spirit of his resolution is one which we all support. It gives us an opportunity to speak once again about the plight of the handicapped and the disabled in our society and of the steps that we must take to accommodate and help them.

Every member of this House recognizes that the 13 per cent of our population with disabilities, some 3.2 million Canadians, have a long way yet to go before they achieve the same rights to access and participation in the life of our society and country that most of us take for granted.

Nowhere is that more evident than when it comes to the question of economic integration. Persons with disabilities are among the poorest members of our society. Sixty per cent of the disabled in the 1986 census reported incomes under \$10,000 per year. Their participation rate in the paid labour force is only slightly above half that of adult Canadians without a disability.

Without economic integration, very few Canadians with disabilities will ever know economic independence. Without that independence, participation in our society or in any society will seldom be realized.

Not so long ago the traditional attitude toward persons with disabilities was to exclude them from the productive sectors of our society because they were thought capable only of dependence. Our laws and our policies were directed in effect to limiting their self reliance with the result that regardless of abilities, they were effectively isolated from the mainstream.

Today, we know better. We know that within the disabled community of Canada, there is a resource of talent and ability that, given the opportunity, can not only improve the lives of persons with disabilities themselves, but also contribute significantly to society's growth and to society's prosperity.

These are the beliefs reflected in the recommendations of the standing committee's report. When the government tabled its response to that response on November 8, my colleague, the Secretary of State wrote in his letter to the chairperson of the committee, the hon. member for Oxford, the government's clear and emphatic acceptance of the committee's recommendations.

Let us look at the standing committee's recommendations and the government's response to them. Recommendation one of the standing committee calls for the Government of Canada to work with the committee, the voluntary sector, the private sector, labour, and with the disabled community itself, to bring forward a national strategy to achieve the economic integration of persons with disabilities.

What was the government's response? In no uncertain terms, the government pledged itself to the objective of economic integration. It pledged that not only would the minister responsible for the disabled work in partnership toward this goal, but that the Ministers of Health and Welfare, Employment and Immigration and Finance would be partners in that work.

Going beyond that, Public Works Canada is another major government department which makes a commitment almost daily on behalf of the disabled. The decade 1983 to 1992 has been termed the decade of disabled persons, so declared by the Prime Minister. We participate the first week of June each year in National Access Awareness Week to underline that commitment. This participation is particularly important, as I have said, to Public Works Canada.

Those of us who are fortunate enough not to be disabled do not usually appreciate the barriers faced by others. We do not have to phone a restaurant beforehand to find out if the door is wide enough for our wheelchair. However, most of us have, at one time or another, tried to find an office hidden in a poorly designed maze of corridors. Laden down with packages or a briefcase, we have tried to open heavy doors. Those occasions should help us to understand the plight of disabled persons.

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All of us have a stake in barrier-free design. The rate of disability increases with age, to the point that today two out of every five Canadians aged 65 or more will live to be disabled in some way or another.

It is not only physical barriers that must come down. Ramps are being built, doorways are being widened and employment equity is moving ahead. But there are many other invisible barriers which Public Works Canada and all Canadians are endeavouring to address. These include inadequate understanding of what disabled people can do.