

Oral Questions

[English]

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Minister of Human Resources Development and Minister of Western Economic Diversification, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the proposed transfer program is a clear recognition that the provinces can take more responsibility for making decisions.

We are freeing up and making far more flexible their choices of priorities within a broad range of programming on education, welfare and health. That is the whole point of consolidating the existing transfer system, to give the provinces the freedom of choice to look at programming which suits the individual needs of their own areas.

At the same time, it is a national transfer program. There are base conditions and those conditions are already X stamped, as we said in the budget itself, such as the five conditions under the Canada Health Act and the condition under the Canada assistance plan which protect the mobility rights of Canadians so they can move from one region to another and still be eligible for some form of assistance. Those are the basic conditions which were put forward.

• (1120)

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Bellehumeur (Berthier—Montcalm, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I understand clearly that national standards are here to stay.

But given the government's policy regarding transfer payments, which will ensure that Ottawa will dictate these national standards and will reduce the provinces to mere administrative branches, are we to take this as another example of the flexible federalism so touted by the Liberals?

Hon. Marcel Massé (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Public Service Renewal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is obviously trying to use scare tactics. The budget makes it clear that fewer strings will be attached to the Canada social transfer than was the case for transfer payments previously.

The conditions to be met in the area of health care remain the same, as is explained in the budget. There have never been any conditions tied to post-secondary education, particularly in Quebec, which has opted out since 1964. All the conditions tied to social assistance have been eliminated, excepting the one barring any minimum period of residency to qualify.

Therefore, it is very clear, and the budget states this, that any future federal-provincial agreement will be based on mutual consent and, consequently, contrary to what the hon. member would have us believe, there are fewer conditions to be met than before.

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Mr. Speaker, while it is recognized that social assistance and education come under provincial jurisdiction, the federal government clearly shows its intention to interfere shamelessly in these areas of provincial jurisdiction by imposing its views and goals on the provinces through national standards.

My question is for the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs. How can the minister reconcile this denial of the provinces' exclusive jurisdiction, which leaves the door wide open to confrontation with Quebec, and the openness, mutual understanding and flexible federalism he is talking about?

Hon. Marcel Massé (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Public Service Renewal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am hearing the exact same argument being put forth again and it is as flawed as it was in the previous question. The budget clearly indicates that the requirements attached to social transfers will be reduced and that, if social assistance programs are subject to standards, these standards will be set by mutual consent.

This is mentioned several times in the budget. There is no mistake about it and I can only conclude that the members opposite are, once again, misrepresenting to the people of Canada and Quebec facts that are clearly stated in the budget.

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the mere fact of thinking about imposing standards or Canada-wide requirements in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction constitutes in itself interference in Quebec's exclusive jurisdiction. That is what the minister just said.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Loubier: Will the minister acknowledge that explicitly linking transfer payments for social assistance, postsecondary education and health, which are areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction, to strict compliance with national standards imposed by Ottawa looks like a new attack against Quebec?

Hon. Marcel Massé (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Minister responsible for Public Service Renewal, Lib.): The propaganda effort continues, Mr. Speaker. The Bloc Québécois just keeps stating a position contradicted by facts, by the budget and by reality.

I can only repeat what I said earlier, namely that the budget is clear, that the requirements for social assistance have been reduced, that, if any standards are established, they will be established by mutual consent. It is very unfortunate that the opposition informs the people of Quebec so poorly on such major issues.