

Old Age Security Act

members will be pushing for those basic reforms which we are suggesting could and should be brought about by the government today.

In closing I can assure the House that this legislation will receive my support. I only regret that it does not go further at this time.

• (1500)

Mr. Ambrose Hubert Peddle (Grand Falls-White Bay-Labrador): Mr. Speaker, some of the measures of Bill C-207 are very much overdue. Such measures as there are, have been brought forward as a result of much pleading, goading and beseeching by the opposition. Also, there has been considerable help from Father Time who inexorably is bringing closer a federal election. The government has finally put on its cloak of compassion, that cloak which Liberal governments seem to put on for brief periods every three or four years.

Mr. Baldwin: Also the cloak of false virtue.

Mr. Peddle: On April 26 the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Munro), while talking about other legislation before the House, said as reported at page 1697 of *Hansard*:

As many hon. members know, the Economic Council of Canada, the Senate report on poverty, the Council on Social Development, to say nothing of numerous other studies, have all indicated that in this country perhaps four to five million Canadians are living below the poverty line and that something must be done to alleviate their situation.

In that speech the minister recognized that large numbers of people in Canada live below the poverty line. Despite that, the combined increase in old age pensions and the guaranteed income supplement as proposed is not large enough, for those who depend for their sole support on such government assistance will still live at standards considerably below the recognized poverty line.

The government is being inconsistent. Anyone who depends for sustenance on his old age pension and supplement is to all intents and purposes like an employee of the government. Surely it is consistent if the government on the one hand recognizes the level of the poverty line and on the other pays these needy people amounts that will keep them living at a standard considerably below the poverty line. I am not proposing to pick figure out of the air, although I suggest that is precisely what the government has done.

In past years, as I have said before, the government has handed out pensions and other social benefits for political reasons; there is no question about that. I hoped this measure would remove those benefits effectively from the political arena. I imagined that we might move away from the concept under which every three or four years governments use these benefits for promoting their own political purposes.

If benefits are to be improved, it is logical to begin at a starting point and not at a figure which may have been pulled out of thin air, whether it be \$130 a month, \$140 a month or any figure like it. This legislation does not contain a logical starting point. Rather than going along with any figure that the NDP might pull out of the air, I would suggest that the reasonable starting point is that

established by the Economic Council of Canada, namely, the poverty line. Perhaps our starting point ought to be slightly above that because any lower figure will not bear scrutiny.

There is another area that I want to touch on briefly. I think it is a tragic circumstance that the people to whom I am about to refer have not been recognized in the legislation before us. I am talking about the husband, for instance, who has reached the age at which he is entitled to the old age pension and supplement, possibly, if he has no other means of livelihood, and whose wife has not reached that age; she might be any age under pensionable age. I am thinking particularly of wives who are not yet 65 and do not possess an earning capacity. I know the minister can say that the man who has reached 65 will be treated as a single pensioner and must look elsewhere for the necessary sustenance if he is to keep alive and maintain a roof over his head; in other words, he must look to the provincial welfare agency.

Mr. Speaker, a great many old people do not find it easy to approach such agencies. I have personally known of male pensioners who decided to stick it out, possibly for four or five years, until their wives became eligible for pension. It is not fair to ask such people to undergo these ordeals and I think their plight ought to be recognized. I realize that there must be a starting age for eligibility for the old age pension and I do not suggest at this point that 65 is not reasonable. Neither do I suggest that the basic age be changed. However, I am sure the minister will recognize that a man is obligated to support his wife and family. Perhaps the minister could work out a formula involving the old age pension supplement which would take into account a man's obligations.

The government has said that it recognizes for all time, through this measure, the impact on our older citizens of rising living costs. We are told that a formula is to be established for automatically increasing benefits each year as living costs rise. The increase is to be connected to the consumer price index. If you ask a pensioner with no income save his pension and supplement what he knows about the cost of living, he will tell you that he does not know very much about the consumer price index, about the Economic Council of Canada or bodies like it. He will tell you that for him increases in the cost of living mean increases in the cost of keeping a roof over the head of himself and his wife. He will tell you that living cost increases mean more expensive food, clothing and all the other necessities of life.

These are the matters that concern him. He is not greatly concerned about statistics, about the consumer price index or anything like that. If the government really wants people with no means except pensions and supplements to cope with increases in living costs, it must make it possible for pensioners whose spouses have not yet reached pensionable age to meet rising living costs and live in dignity. I am surprised that the government has not recognized the importance of this point. At one point I thought they had. I do not know how many people are in that category, but the number must be fairly substantial. I do not know what their political impact is and I do not really care. I merely recognize that a fairly large segment of our people live under these tragic circumstances and I