

Social Policy

organization. Think about it; they cannot be charitable unless they are political, but if they are political they are not allowed to be charitable. The absurdity of this situation must be evident even to a government as cynical, hard-headed and hard-hearted as the one we have lived with for the past decade.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Miss MacDonald: The non-profit and voluntary organizations play a much needed role in bringing issues into the open, in highlighting the plight of certain groups, in analysing the situation of the elderly, the unemployed, youth, children, et cetera, both as to present and future needs. Their work cannot be done without promoting change, and this means legislative change.

It is only too obvious that we cannot rely solely on the government to assess and correct the situation of the poor in this country. Their record so far is not an enviable one. The inequities of our social system have not been evened out over the last decade, in spite of the fact that government expenditures have more than quadrupled in the last ten years.

The elderly are the greatest sufferers and the greatest victims of the inequities in our social system. It is indeed discouraging to think that in the Canada of today one-third of the elderly, some one million Canadians, live below the poverty line. The group that concerns me most in that particular age category is the group of unattached elderly, especially single elderly women. Almost one-half of the unattached single Canadians in the age bracket 65 to 69 and almost two-thirds of those over the age of 70 live below the Statistics Canada poverty line.

The situation for unattached women 60 to 65 is even worse. None of the government's pension programs touch the majority of these women. Unable to get work because of their age or because of ill health, ineligible for Canada Pension Plan benefits—because in the government's view housework is not productive labour—and without a husband or a husband's pension to take care of them, these women are at the mercy of the welfare rolls. Many of them eke out a meagre existence on less than \$2,000 a year.

Some of these women, in this age category, 60 to 65, previously lived in relative comfort a few steps above the poverty line while their husbands were alive—they could draw between them or jointly the old age security, the guaranteed income supplement and the spouse's allowance as a couple. These women now find themselves alone and pensionless. The situation arises from the government's curious logic in relation to the spouse's allowance, which says that two people may need \$6,000 on which to live—and they have to show a need to achieve that—while the pensioner is alive, but when one dies, the one that is left needs nothing to get along on. That remaining spouse has the pension withdrawn. Now, what curious logic, what curious kind of reasoning, is this? One could really laugh at the government's reasoning if the results of it were not so tragic.

Not only must these elderly people—although my main concern here is with women, the situation is equally desperate

for many unattached men—cope with meagre incomes, but they must also cope with rising costs, especially with regard to food and shelter. The price of food which has come close to doubling in over-all price since 1972 has risen 12 per cent in the past year. And it cannot all be blamed on the price of coffee, as the government tries to make out. The price of a loaf of bread, a quart of milk, a pound of butter, all basic essentials, has almost doubled. A can of salmon, which is hardly a luxury, cost 72 cents five years ago and now costs \$1.41; a box of soda crackers has risen from 28 cents to 55 cents. A basic 15-item food basket that cost \$10 in 1973 cost \$18 last month. That is what these people have to cope with in addition to having no or low income.

Many of these elderly people on meagre incomes have less than \$15 a week for food. Their incomes are, for the most part, static, and doubled food prices for them means not that it costs them twice as much to eat, but that they can only afford half as much. There is a great difference between what you can buy and what you can afford, and this applies particularly to elderly people on fixed and low incomes.

What is of particular concern to me is that their diets have probably only half the nutritional value that they had five years ago. Many of these elderly people are undernourished; more than half of elderly females have a less than adequate intake of iron and vitamins A and B. This has been shown to be true by many reports and statistics. Is it any wonder that is so when the price of onions, turnips and carrots, the most basic Canadian year-round vegetables—not imports but year-round Canadian vegetables—has doubled since 1972?

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Even for the elderly whose income from old age security and the guaranteed income supplement is indexed to the cost of living, increased food prices mean less food. They spend proportionately more of their income on food and we see food prices generally rise faster than the overall price index. An income increase of 5 per cent or 6 per cent cannot match the past year's increase in food prices of 12 per cent. It is therefore imperative that a system of indexing be devised which reflects the real expenditures of the elderly and indexes pensions accordingly.

The situation of the elderly is not one in which we can take pride, certainly not one in which the government can take any pride. The situation of elderly women is shocking, as the Canadian Council on Social Development has stated in a recent report on women and pensions. When questioned about this shocking situation the government responds that they are doing all they can. They shrug their shoulders and say "We cannot spend any more money; the taxpayers don't want us to spend any more money." We have heard them say that and it may be true. But we are not asking them to spend more money; we are simply asking them to spend properly the money that they do collect—not to spend more, just to spend it well.

We might be more sympathetic to the government's excuse of lack of money to help ease the plight of widows, for