

Statements by Ministers

Minister says so on page three of her statement, on the occasion of the meeting of cities and towns—I said and I repeat that when Canadians are well informed they are always one step ahead of their Governments, regardless of their political views. It is important to properly inform the people and increase their awareness. When Canadians are properly informed of particular situations, they have always been and will continue to be more generous, understanding and open minded than any other Government.

On behalf of my party, therefore, I support this statement. We hope to see a great many initiatives during this year, a year which should not be felt to be just “another” so called international year of the United Nations on a given subject. I for one feel that we should be activists on these issues. Who has ever heard in Canada—I will conclude on this—that this year is the International Year of Peace?

Once a year has been proclaimed, we make fine statements, then we sit down and we are satisfied. We have done our share. I see that the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mrs. MacDonald) is here; she is part of a group of activists who want to do more. We should think and be concerned about these matters on a continuing basis. On behalf of my party, I want to tell you that we have this continuing concern and I hope that it will spread everywhere; this is a non-partisan issue and I thank the Hon. Minister once more for giving us on Friday advanced notice of her statement. I hope her colleagues of the Cabinet will do the same and I can assure her that we will support any initiative that is consistent with Canada's reputation in the world.

• (1110)

[English]

Mr. Mike Cassidy (Ottawa Centre): Mr. Speaker, I say with great regret that I am deeply disappointed with the Minister's statement on behalf of the Government in respect of how Canada intends to mark International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

The Minister has said that the Government intends to participate in a conference which will be sponsored by the Canadian Committee of the International Council on Social Welfare and the Canadian Association of Housing and Renewal. I hate to say it, but it reminds me of the kind of reaction to urgent social problems of the previous Government. In terms of announced policies, that is all the Government has.

Also the Minister commented upon the fact that the housing problem and the problem of homelessness are acute in many countries of the world. She talked about visiting the camps for refugees and the slums and *favelas* of the cities of the Third World. There is no question that there are desperate problems in terms of homelessness in the Third World.

I, for one, would suggest that there are certain people in Canada who would exchange our climate for that in some of the Third World cities, and *favelas* there for their housing conditions in Canada. I believe we cannot afford to ignore the fact that homelessness is not only found in other parts of the world. It is a reality in this country. We have an increasing number of people living in poverty and an increasing number of people who do not know from where their next meal or their meals for the next month will come. There has been a tremendous growth in food banks in almost every major city across Canada. These food banks are now feeding tens of thousands of families per month in major cities such as Ottawa, Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, and Halifax. It is an indication of the greater degree of poverty that is finding root in the country than we had known just a few years ago. Some 4.5 million Canadians are living in poverty. There has been an increase of some 800,000 people from the beginning of the 1980s, and the situation appears to be getting worse, not better.

I should like to refer to my own situation, representing a riding on the doorstep of Parliament Hill. I know that homeless is not something abstract to be found in Africa, Latin America, or Asia; it exists right here. People who are homeless find their way onto the Mall and into the Rideau Centre during the winter. The good citizens of Ottawa complain about them, but the reason they are there is that they have no other place to go which is at all warm and protected from the weather. If they are lucky, they may be able to get to a shelter at night.

People will recall how the citizens of Toronto and of Canada in general were shocked at the death by freezing of Drina Joubert in December of last year. It brought home, in a very dramatic way, how a woman of good background was pushed into abject poverty and ultimately to death because she fell through the cracks in our system.

We have some 20,000 to 40,000 people who live on the streets in Canada now. We have many Canadians living in desperately substandard housing conditions. Let us look in particular at our native population. People from other countries, when they see Canada being critical of actions of other countries, say that we are sanctimonious because of what happens with our own native population. I suspect they are right. For example, nearly half the Indian dwellings in the Northwest Territories have more than one person per room. Just over half the Indian dwellings in Yukon have no central heating. A third of the Indian dwellings in the Northwest Territories need major repairs. These situations exist here in Canada.

I urge the Government in the strongest possible way to do more about homelessness than just have a conference. We should have a commitment before the 1988 election to wipe out homelessness in Canada. We have the resources to do it, if we had the political will.