

Old Age Security Act Amendment

This is a very important point. It is a question the minister should look into first thing tomorrow morning. He should have the department find out what the provincial governments say will be the effect on their plans of the additional \$30 a month or less down to \$1. He should ascertain how this program will affect the recipients of supplementary benefits in the provinces. I suggest that the minister start working on the problem tomorrow morning, and he should be able to give an answer to the committee before the end of the week. There is no reason at all why we should not have an answer to this question.

Mr. MacEachen: Mr. Chairman, I merely want to point out that the situation with respect to these pensioners would not be in any way different under the proposals advanced by my hon. friends in the opposition than under the proposals I am advancing. I do not share the interpretation put forward by my hon. friend with respect to what constitutes my duty as the Minister of National Health and Welfare. My duty is not to determine for the provinces what they will do with respect to the operation of this plan.

● (9:20 p.m.)

I am surprised that my hon. friend would suggest that I should know what the province of Alberta or any other province will do. All I did was to make sure that the individual recipient, with respect to action which I recommended to this parliament, would not lose any benefit recommended under this bill because of a supplement received from a provincial government. It is absolutely clear that no benefit will be lost as a result of this bill because of a benefit which is received from a province. If a province decides to take another course of action as a result of what is done in this parliament, then surely that is something that the provincial legislature must decide, and it is going rather far to expect me to be able to make a definitive statement on that. What I have done is to ensure that benefits available under this bill will not be prejudiced because of benefits payable by a province. I think this is quite important.

Mr. Chatterton: I think that this is a rather irresponsible position to take because the payments that are being made available now are shared by the federal government. If the payments we make do not prejudice the payments obtained from the provincial governments through existing programs, then I am not concerned. Surely in view of the fact that the federal government is paying half the

benefits now being received by these people through federal legislation the minister should be concerned about the position that the provincial governments may take as a result of this legislation. This is part of the government's responsibility.

Mr. Simpson: Mr. Chairman, I would like to follow this up by once again saying to the minister that although he may not be responsible for any action that the provinces may take, the federal government is not only responsible for any action taken by a department of that government, namely, the Indian affairs department, but it is duty bound to make sure in no uncertain terms that the supplementary payments now being received by our Indian people who are in receipt of old age assistance are not reduced to any extent. The minister has said on several occasions that he cannot say what the provinces will do. However, he has also said, both in the house and on television, that these supplementary payments will not be taken into consideration in determining the pensioner's income. This is quite correct but it has appeared to many people to mean that the government believes that these payments will be continued.

We cannot blame the minister for this interpretation but this might be the understanding which a lot of people might have of his statement. The minister has said on many occasions how much benefit this legislation will bring to the older people but the true facts of the matter are that a person who is receiving \$75 a month and through necessity is receiving an extra amount of up to \$30 a month from the province, or from the Indian affairs branch, will not be better off if the province discontinues this supplement or if the federal government omits to make it quite clear that the supplementary payments which are being made now to the Indian people will continue together with the extra \$30 a month.

Mr. Knowles: Mr. Chairman, the minister said that he is concerned that no individual in any province suffer any loss of benefit as a result of this legislation. I know that the overriding concern is that there should be an increase in the benefits but the minister is facing the fact that there could be a loss of benefit and he does not want this to happen. May I point out to him—I am repeating what has already been said but I am trying to clarify it—that although in some cases the pensioner may get from the government an extra \$30 and lose \$30 from the province and as a result seem to be no worse off, the loss of medical benefits can be a serious factor.