

Old Age Security Act

Federal Government and the provinces, it is obvious that the net amount of \$270 million which has been mentioned would be reduced by several million dollars to take into account the savings realized under the Canada Assistance Plan.

There is also the fact that if this program were extended and its discriminatory aspects eliminated, since this is a universal program, which means that all those eligible receive benefits, we would also be removing some of the concerns of a great many senior citizens and giving them social tranquility and peace of mind about their economic security all of which would probably reflect on the state of their physical health which would also be an additional advantage.

What is even more important, Mr. Speaker, is the savings that will be made because of the subsidies. My colleague explained this earlier when he outlined very clearly how senior citizens who are affected by these programs or bills similar to the one under consideration and who are treated in senior citizens homes, and residences and asked whether they would be left with the same amount of money as they were under the regulations applied since December 1984. My colleague, who has a lot of experience in this regard, mentioned an amount of \$34 in certain provinces and \$77 in others, which means additional savings.

I can assure the Hon. Member for Charlevoix that the net amount necessary to eliminate the discrimination contained in Bill C-26 is not \$1.5 billion, and not even \$270 million, but perhaps \$100 million. This is the amount which would put some equity in our system and eliminate a type of discrimination which is totally unacceptable. Later on, I would like to say a few words about the way this bill will be administered, which will be extremely difficult if it remains in its present form. What I want to emphasize however, is that we could at the same time remove this discriminatory aspect and treat all citizens equally. Nowadays, because of our changing society and societal attitudes, there is much more understanding for people who, for one reason or another, have become divorced or separated. Today, this is much more acceptable and even permissible socially. Why should these people be treated differently?

Mr. Speaker, if we are objecting to that discrimination and pointing out that the funds involved are not excessive, we also want to emphasize the administrative nightmare that will result if Bill C-26 is passed without amendments, because all kinds of cases will occur. I will ask the minister how he defines a widow or a widower. The answer will be: It is quite simple, it is the person whose spouse is dead . . . However, what happens to the person whose spouse is dead when he or she remarries or is separated? How will that situation fit with the definition? Such cases exist, and they are not uncommon, as any member of this House will know. How will you deal with such individuals? Will they be considered a widower or a widow or as separated? This is fertile ground for discrimination.

• (1230)

Let us consider also the administrative aspect of the problem; the monks and nuns to whom my colleague from Shefford (Mr. Lapierre) referred earlier have taken a vow of celibacy. Does it mean that they are entirely ineligible to government assistance? I think that it could be highly discriminatory and some answers will have to be provided with respect to the administrative aspect.

Mr. Speaker, even if Bill C-26 is an interesting improvement, and I readily admit it, I do not understand why such discriminatory provisions are included in the bill, thus creating many problems. All the members, for example, have visited homes for the aged where the main activity is a game of bridge. There will be four persons around the same bridge table having the same financial means, one of whom will receive the pension and another not.

Mr. Speaker, before concluding, since you have just indicated that the time allotted to me is almost expired I would like to come back to the financial issue and reiterate that the additional cost to the government to remove the discrimination in Bill C-26 is not as substantial as suggested by the Hon. Member for Charlevoix (Mr. Hamelin) if we take into account the savings made in social welfare and administrative costs for the care of individuals residing in senior citizens homes, then the net disbursement by the government is not \$270 million but much lower. Moreover, if we also take into consideration other programs announced by the government such as the new uniforms for the Armed Forces or some of the answers given to questions on the Order Paper dealing with expenditures made by this government, I am convinced that we could give the priority to our senior citizens and remove that discrimination from Bill C-26.

Mr. Fernand Robichaud (Westmorland-Kent): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak to Bill C-26. First of all, I rejoice with those who will qualify for the allowances, some 85,000 Canadians. It has also been pointed out that these allowances will go mostly to needy people and others experiencing difficult times. It is indeed appropriate that we rejoice, Mr. Speaker, But why have single and divorced people been left out? How is it that single people aged 60 to 65 as well as divorced people in the same age bracket are not eligible for those allowances? Are they not full-fledged citizens like others, Mr. Speaker? Why create a second class of citizens who will be treated less generously than others?

Here is what the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) said about Bill C-26:

[English]

This is an important step towards greater social justice.