

Oral Questions

• (1115)

In developing countries wracked by civil war, it costs between \$300 and \$700 to remove them. Last year we removed 85,000 but seeded two million at the same time.

I put a private members' bill forward on September 21 asking the House to ban land mines and anti-personnel devices. I hope for the sake of the most impoverished people in the world the House joins hands to do just that.

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[Translation]

SOCIAL PROGRAM REFORM

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in the past few days it has become increasingly clear that this government is trying to hide the devastating impact that a number of reforms planned by Ottawa will have, especially in the case of social programs.

The government keeps postponing the release of the details of these reforms until after the referendum. Furthermore, the last budget announced cuts totalling seven billion dollars in transfers to the provinces for the financing of social programs.

Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that cuts in payments to the provinces for social programs, irrespective of the criteria the federal government will use, will cause a major shortfall in funding for spending on health care, post-secondary education and social assistance in Quebec, a shortfall that, depending on the criteria applied, is estimated at between \$1.9 and \$2.5 billion over the next two years, and this is only in Quebec?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, contrary to what the hon. member for Roberval says, we are not hiding a thing. We announced our schedule for transfers to the provinces at the beginning of our mandate. We gave them three years. We told them from the outset: we will continue to increase a little bit next year, and that was 1994, and then in 1995 we will go on increasing, and the cuts will come in 1996 and 1997.

However, next year the subsidies we pay will still be higher than they were at the time we formed the government. The Minister of Finance explained to the provinces that he would give them time to adjust and that he would even continue to increase payments during the first two years. However, they were told to expect adjustments.

The provinces were aware of this and initiated their own cuts. For instance, last year in December, Quebec's health minister announced cuts totalling \$500 million. We still gave slightly more than the previous year, but he made cuts. Obviously, everyone has to make adjustments. Provincial governments across Canada are making adjustments. The Government of Quebec has started to do so as well, and it will have to make more adjustments after the referendum.

We told all provincial governments ahead of time what to expect. I think this is all very fair and very open and shows a government that has absolutely nothing to hide before, during or even after the referendum.

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval, BQ): In fact, Mr. Speaker, it is the future we want to talk about. The Prime Minister seems to appreciate talking about that.

We know that in the future, the federal government is planning cuts in unemployment insurance and old age pensions. We found that out last week here in the House, but the bad news will not come until after the referendum.

Would the Prime Minister agree that by attacking the most vulnerable members of our society with cuts in his own programs that are targeted to the needy, he is hitting them twice with cuts in payments to Quebec that will total between \$1.9 and \$2.5 billion in two years' time, which will force the Quebec government to add to the cuts made by the federal government? Does he not realize he is hitting the neediest in our society from both sides?

Right Hon. Jean Chrétien (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first of all, the unemployment insurance program was explained in the budget, and we are preparing legislation that will be tabled very shortly.

Just this morning I received a call from a provincial premier who wanted to see me to discuss the legislation, and who begged me not to go ahead immediately because he had a number of representations to make.

• (1120)

I told him: "Fine. As soon as I have time, we will have a meeting, and we will table the bill as soon as possible, because we want people to have time to discuss it".

The hon. member referred to senior citizens. I made it clear here in the House that we have no intention of affecting senior citizens. I made that quite clear. But I also said that we will have to make sure we can still pay the old age pensions of the people who will retire in 2005 and 2010. Good government means planning for the future. And people who are retired now do not have to worry.