

Old Age Security

is to try to increase more often the total amount of benefits, including escalation, rather than load the system, with more frequent escalation, a part of which at least would go into administration and not to the old people. I would rather save on the administration and try to get that money to the people through more frequent raises.

I ask my good friend the Minister of National Health and Welfare, who said these things on March 13, what he has done in the cabinet to which he now belongs—not a cabinet which is in the front room while he is in the back room, mind you. What has the minister done in cabinet to try to get these more frequent raises in the basic amount that he declared on March 13 to be the important thing to do?

Later that same day in the standing committee the minister was pressed further on this question of semi-annual or quarterly escalations. The point was made by Liberal members that the amounts getting through to the pensioners were lagging behind because of the time it took to bring the annual escalation into effect. At page 1:22 of the document to which I have already referred the record says:

MR. LALONDE: My point is that one way for Parliament to compensate for this unavoidable lag is to change the basic amount, every once in a while, as has been done at different times, and people catch up then—more than catch up—on what they might have lost in terms of the delays in the escalation. That is what I meant.

I was not scandalized, Mr. Speaker, as the previous speaker seems to be, over the fact that the government has changed its tune about the cost of administration of a quarterly escalation program. In March, the minister said we must not do this because it would cost too much, but now the government is prepared to spend the money. What scandalizes me, what bothers me and what disturbs me is that the minister, out of his own heart and mind, said in March that what he preferred was to try more often to get increases in the basic amount of the pension. Yet he makes a speech tonight, does not refer to that at all, but refers to Liberal tradition and all that when all he is doing is putting escalation on a quarterly basis.

I know that by putting escalation on a quarterly basis the result will be that in a 12-month period pensioners will get a greater number of dollars than they would have got otherwise. But the fact of the matter is that in any fourth quarter the pensioners, in that quarter, will not be getting any more dollars than they would have got in the twelfth month as the result of an annual escalation. So, Mr. Speaker, to tell us how much this is going to cost and to suggest great generosity on the part of the Liberal government is, I think, an attempt to kid us.

The fact of the matter is that an escalation program is necessary, and I think a quarterly one is better than an annual one. I do not think anyone in this House is going to force a vote or oppose this measure, but to put it in its proper perspective it really is not answering the needs of our older people as individuals on fixed incomes. It is not coming to grips with the basic problem that faces us with reference to senior citizens. This is a problem we have been trying to solve for 50 years, namely, that they are entitled not just to charity and welfare, not just to enough to keep them alive, but to enough to enable them to live in the respect and dignity that they deserve as members of a

society, because they are human beings and because of the contribution they have made over the years.

Of course we will support this measure, Mr. Speaker; of course we will put it through with a limited amount of debate. I imagine there will have to be a number of Liberal speeches to boost it and try to dress it up a bit, but I plead with the minister to get back to that feeling that I thought he had for the old age pensioners when he made his first speech back on January 11. I ask him to get back to that approach, to that appreciation, and face the fact that what he is doing tonight is peanuts. It really does not meet the needs and rights of our older people.

I submit, sir, that we are doing the right thing in terms of the old age pension cause, that we are doing the right thing in the political life of this country when, as a New Democratic Party, we say that the time has come to go for a basic old age pension of \$200 a month. Maybe we will do well if we get from the Liberals half of the proposed increase or get it up to \$150, but we are going to keep working for the higher amount because we believe our people are entitled to it and that our economy can afford it.

I know there are those who ask what it will do to our tax bill and the economy, but the whole aim of society surely, Mr. Speaker, is to order its economy and order its arrangements so that there is justice and equity among our people. We have not really done that until we make sure that our older and our retired people get the standard of living to which they are entitled.

While I am on my feet and discussing the question of old age pensions, Sir, there are one or two other things I should like to say. When I was planning what I might say I confess I said to myself "Now watch out; it is a simple bill dealing only with escalation and there might be someone in the chair who would say we should stick to that narrow provision". But, Mr. Speaker, you have been stymied. Because in introducing this bill the minister made very few references to the quarterly escalation that the bill effects; rather he gave us this great history about the traditions of the Liberal Party. Of course, once he had made that speech the official spokesman for the Progressive Conservative Party felt he could do the same, and so we have a wide open debate on the whole question of the Old Age Security Act and the amendments that ought to be made to it. Because the minister has opened up the act and told us what has been done over the years, I remind him again—I know there is no corner of this House in which I have more support than on the Liberal side, especially the members from the province of Quebec—that the time has come to lower the eligible age for old age security and also under the Canada Pension Plan.

I was hoping, after I made that generous reference to Quebec Liberals, that they would applaud!

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Now they are applauding, even if I had to ask for it. Mr. Speaker, this is an issue that will not go away. The government cannot continue to insist that the pension be paid only at age 65. I note that the government of the province of British Columbia is making the first start. The provinces have to pay attention to their limited resources and have to apply

[Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre).]