

Old Age Security Act

ter of finance, estimated that the annual cost of the program would be \$342 million. Today, there are nearly 1,800,000 pensioners who are receiving the basic old age pension and supplement. The total annual cost of the basic pension plus the supplement has now risen to nearly \$3 billion. In 1952 the minister of finance, when talking about the \$342 million, said that the burden of this duty we are voluntarily assuming is not a light one and that no one should be under any misapprehension about this. He told the House that the cost was a heavy one and reminded the House of the simple proposition that a dollar paid out to one person must first of all be taken from another.

If the cost was considered heavy in 1952, think of the cost of the program today, even if one discounts the factor of inflation. In that year, the government was prepared to spend \$342 million. We are now being asked to spend \$3 billion on a vastly improved program. The cost is high, there is no question about it. Yet it is a cost which I believe most taxpayers are willing to bear gladly. They bear the taxation for this program gladly because they see it as an insurance policy for their own old age, as a contributory plan for their own retirement. They bear the taxation for this program gladly because they know that the old age security program provides a greater measure of dignified independence for our senior citizens.

Before 1952, a very high proportion of Canadians in retirement were obliged to seek some form of social assistance in order to meet basic needs and just stay alive. If the legislation now being considered passes, it will be possible for all senior citizens, except a small number with special needs, to live without having to apply for social assistance of some kind or other. With respect to those with special needs, such as prescription drugs, care in nursing homes, or in their own homes, the costs can in part be met by the Canada Assistance Plan. The federal government pays 50 per cent of costs incurred under that plan. In addition, if the provinces wish to increase supplements that may be paid to the aged and handicapped, federal cost-sharing assistance is available, as I mentioned earlier.

The present level of taxation in all western countries which is needed to pay for programs such as old age security and many others which have been introduced would have been unthinkable 50, or even 20 years ago. Today, however, there is general acceptance of taxation levels needed to pay for these programs, because they are felt to be the result of social progress. It was pressure from the people themselves which made this progress possible. Under popular influence such social programs as old age security have given new rights to our citizens. I stress that the pension is given as of right. It is not a handout; it is a right of the citizens of our country. It has increased their opportunities and opened roads that were previously closed by poverty and secured people against risks that in earlier times were disastrous for individuals and families.

Despite wars and other adverse events, production has increased and incomes and standards of living of a broad stratum of our national community have been rising more rapidly than ever. As a result, the prospects of the young are much better than the prospects which faced their parents or grandparents when they started out in life.

[Mr. Penner.]

Because this is so, I detect in Canada today a general willingness—more than that, an eagerness, a pressure—for a universal pension program which is as generous as possible. This is one government program which provokes few complaints about the amount of money spent on it, even though we are to spend nearly \$3 billion.

Speaking as one Canadian, I am proud of the way that Canada has provided a reasonable order of protection for its elderly citizens. Canada is one of the first countries in the world which has provided by legislation that pensioners shall, as a matter of right, without reference to contributions that they may or may not have made to any particular pension plan, and without the imposition of a needs or means test, be guaranteed an income which will permit them to live out their declining years with some measure of security and dignity.

• (1230)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Wagner (Saint-Hyacinthe): Mr. Speaker, this bill is very close to my heart. During the election campaign I continuously stressed the urgency of giving equitable treatment to our golden age citizens. I repeated everywhere that a nation that forgets its senior citizens is a heartless nation. And a government that refuses them a well-deserved comfortable life is a heartless government. I am therefore gratified to a certain degree by the very minor increase granted through this bill, but I recognize with much less gratification the diffidence of the government in a field where hearts with humane feelings should be inspired to greater generosity.

I read attentively the speech delivered by the hon. Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde). I expressly say I read it, Mr. Speaker, because while the minister was delivering his speech I was attending a meeting of the House Committee on External Affairs and National Defence and it is one of the drawbacks of our way of proceeding that we should have to sit in a House committee while bills are being debated here in the House.

Still, I did read his speech very carefully and I was struck, right off the start, by the clearly partisan tone which coloured the first words of the minister. He hurried to give all the credit for this measure to a liberal minister, of a liberal government, succeeding other liberal governments, with the result that the liberals alone know what is good for the people, they alone have the monopoly of social security, and without them, we would be very helpless, very miserable.

I would have thought, Mr. Speaker, that the arrogance reflected in the words of the minister had disappeared as a result of the lesson taught on October 30 last. But it must be that feelings die hard and that attitudes persist in spite of the lessons of the past.

Mr. Speaker, in presenting such an important bill, the minister should have placed himself on a much higher, more detached and serene level. Does he forget, for instance, that public funds do not belong to a party, a minister or a member of parliament, that they belong to the Canadian people, that they are not the exclusive property of the liberal party?