

Government Orders

We are opposed to the bill as it is before the House for third reading. We call on the government to withdraw the bill. It is untimely. It will hurt those who need our assistance and support the most.

The initiative by St. Andrew's church is great for the community. It requires the support, endorsement and promotion by different levels of government. I would like to echo what my colleagues have said about this piece of legislation. It is ill-timed. It will hurt the people of Canada. It will not address the socioeconomic problems that we have to deal with and address.

Mr. Bob Speller (Haldimand—Norfolk): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to say that I appreciate being given the opportunity to make comments today about the government's plan to amend the Canada Assistance Plan which will essentially take money out of the hands of my constituents and indeed out of the hands of rural Canadians.

For a fairly long time we have been debating this issue. Many important points have been made by my colleagues. Many people in my riding of Haldimand—Norfolk have come to me personally to talk about this bill. They are afraid of this bill. We have been told throughout Canada that Canada's poor citizens will suffer most because of this bill. Basic necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, utilities and household supplies will be denied to many Canadians because of this bill.

Services provided for the poor such as dental care, services provided for disabled persons, foster homes for abused children, safe housing for abused women and subsidized child care for low income families are inevitably going to be cut back because of this bill.

We will have a situation where the people who can least afford this kind of government restraint are the people who are going to suffer because of it. While the rich get richer because of this government's economic policies, the poor will inevitably have to pay the price.

This is just not fair. Given these terrible economic times, I cannot think of a worse or more inappropriate time to bring in such a piece of legislation. It seems to be a lack of common sense and a lack of real compassion for what is happening in Canada, especially rural Canada.

Is it not obvious to the government that the recession has put many Canadians out of jobs? Some are just

temporary. More and more people are going to need financial assistance from the federal government. This is certainly not the best time to introduce such legislation.

• (1130)

The Canada Assistance Plan has been an integral part of federal-provincial relations for almost 30 years and has been a reflection of the co-operation and the co-ordination between all levels of government in this country. In fact, it is one of those programs that binds this country together. It is one of those programs that really identifies us as Canadians and not as North Americans.

More important, it is the reflection of the Canadian values of caring, sharing and compassion that built this great country. It has been a constant since Confederation where the principle of equalization was spelled out within the Constitution. It is the principle that is holding through to these recent constitutional discussions. It is the one thing, which at the constitutional meetings that all Canadians have discussed, that is, the whole situation with equalization.

However, we seemed to have moved into a whole new era of fiscal federalism within this country. We still have our sacred Canada Assistance Plan but the limits on the transfers to the provinces have essentially gutted the program and have reduced benefits to those people who need them the most.

The importance of the programs under the Canada Assistance Plan is that it tries to deal with the whole issue of poverty, in fact, it tries to eliminate poverty. Indeed, the major problem that we have in this country is child poverty.

Of greater importance though, it attempts to lessen, remove or prevent the causes of this poverty. It is not just a matter of sending out welfare cheques, it is a matter of providing services to help people overcome these hard economic times. The government's decision to cap social assistance transfers to Ontario will unfortunately perpetuate this vicious cycle of poverty.

I would like to take this opportunity to put the issue into a rural context because rural Canada is often forgotten when decisions are made by governments which try to address these issues. It seems at times that this government has forgotten that there are poor in rural Canada.