

*Private Members' Business*

member for Mission—Coquitlam for bringing before this House the subject of children's rights. Canadians are fond of saying that children are our most precious resource in Canada. Having said that, we do very little to ensure appropriate development of children not only in our social structures but especially in our legal system.

As you may know, Mr. Speaker, I have had special interest in the subject of missing children. I want to speak mainly about that particular interest. I am able to confirm many of the remarks made by my colleague from Surrey North who just spoke with respect to the plight of children finding themselves on the streets and highways of Canada without help, without parental help or assistance of any kind.

It is essential and necessary that we have in Canada some legal means to protect children, some constitutional base between the federal government and the provinces to enact appropriate child protection law.

At the heart of the problem is the divided jurisdiction between the Parliament of Canada and the provinces of Canada. Children's rights basically are a provincial matter. It would be difficult, and I have experienced this difficulty in attempting to draft legislation, for the Parliament of Canada to intervene in what is basically a provincial jurisdiction. Resolutions can be found for that aspect of the problem, whether it is through constitutional change or simply federal—provincial co-operation. But if we are to give meaning to the statement that children are our most precious resource, then we should be looking, not only once and from time to time at this matter but on a continuing and continuous basis.

• (1730)

By way of confirming the remarks made by the member for Surrey North about missing children, I must say that children who leave home at an early age, teenagers, and who find themselves on the streets of Canada are outlaws. They are outside the law. There is no question of protection of the law, they are without legal rights.

This leads to prostitution in a very broad sense. It is not simply sexual abuse, it is abuse in the labour force, in the kinds of jobs and benefits that a child labourer receives. In many cases, employers take advantage of their situation by employing them at less than minimum

wages without any other employment benefits. The member is quite correct. You will find them in the worst kinds of labouring positions, in the kitchens of the worst restaurants, in the basements of the worst hotels. It is not difficult for anybody to find proof of this accusation. I am sure they walk the streets of Ottawa and find this very situation existing here in the nation's capital.

It is discouraging to raise this matter from time to time and find out that nothing changes from year to year. I know in 1985 and before, I brought before the House of Commons the missing children's legislation, which was basically to give a legal technique for apprehending—I hate that word—missing children in order to get them back them off the streets and thereby allow some socially beneficial action to be taken.

Even in that small initiative you meet with opposition, technical arguments that it is not the jurisdiction of the Parliament of Canada, that this cannot be done. There is no attempt to resolve the problem, simply another obstacle in the way of resolution.

At least in 1985, as a result of the efforts some of us made, the Solicitor General of the day did respond in part to the problem of missing children and has created some techniques and institutions that have had a beneficial effect in attempting to resolve the problem of missing children. However, it was a relatively minimal effort. I do not say that in any critical way. I mean that it was only the beginning of a program that, frankly, has not been implemented in the way I would have hoped. So we still have to this day in the national capital and the larger cities, and even in the rural areas of Canada, this enormous problem of missing children.

The answer is often given that we do not have the resources to deal with it, the finances in the country are strained. I understand that, I know about the national debt, but it is very clearly a proposition of pay now or pay later. If we do not take the actions to remedy the situation now, we are going to have enormous expenses later.

It is almost unbelievable that we Canadians would not provide a home simply on the basis that a child is missing and on the streets of Canada. We would not pay for hotel bills or apartment rental. We would wait a few years until they are in a penitentiary and then pay all the expenses,