

Old Age Security Act (No. 2)

numbers, could have stopped the Government. Instead, they shamefully supported it.

Finally, let me point out that there is still much that can be done for pension reform, even with the present constraints. We could, for example, act immediately to improve contributory public pensions. The Canada Pension Plan is an excellent plan in universality and portability. Its main defect is that the pension is too low. Our object is to raise the CPP to 50 per cent of the average industrial wage. This is a long-term ambition, but we could at least begin the process now.

Another important reform is to include homemakers in the CPP, at least by instituting the drop-out provision. It is true that Ontario vetoed this measure, but Ontario has since had a Royal Commission on Pensions that recommended accepting it. When have the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Health and Welfare last spoken to Premier Davis about this? Surely now is the time to put pressure on Ontario to move.

Next, we could improve private pensions with regard to portability, vesting, survivors' benefits and the splitting of pension credits on marriage dissolution. We could end discrimination by sex in annuities. We know what is wrong with private pensions and it will not require public expenditure to put that right because these are contributory pensions. What is required is legislation, regulation and co-ordination with the Provinces. Surely this is an important enough matter to give it really high priority.

In closing, let me return to the immediate question of Bill C-131. The answer must be no, no, no! Whatever our economic problems, taking it out on the elderly on fixed incomes at the poverty line is not an acceptable solution in a decent society. If the Government cannot be progressive, imaginative, creative, or competent, let it at least be decent. I ask the Government to withdraw Bill C-131.

Mrs. Jennifer Cossitt (Leeds-Grenville): Mr. Speaker, while I do not agree with all the comments of my colleague, the Hon. Member for Broadview-Greenwood (Ms. McDonald), I want to congratulate her on the excellent maiden speech she just delivered to the House.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today on Bill C-131, an Act to amend the Old Age Security Act, because I am deeply concerned about the welfare of our senior citizens and particularly the 11,000 who live in my riding of Leeds-Grenville. This legislation, introduced into this House by the Government of Canada, is going to add an undue measure of hardship to a sector of our community that cannot even begin to find the resources with which to cope.

This morning I attended a public forum organized by the Ontario Advisory Council on Senior Citizens. The chairman, Frances McHale, had the pleasure of going to Vienna to attend the United Nations World Assembly on Aging and did a lot of work at that Assembly. My colleague, the Hon. Member for Okanagan North (Mr. Dantzer), was also a member of that delegation. In Brockville today the forum is

discussing the problems faced by senior citizens. I think it is very apropos that we, too, discuss this matter today.

In the few weeks that I have been a Member of Parliament I have received a great number of representations from senior citizens in my riding. They are concerned about the effect this legislation will have on their day-to-day lives. They are becoming increasingly troubled about falling further and further behind in their never-ending battle to keep up with inflation.

The majority of senior citizens in Leeds-Grenville and indeed the majority of single pensioners have had to resort to living in senior citizens' housing because they could no longer afford the constantly increasing expense of owning and operating their own homes—homes in which they have rich and fond memories of growing up and homes to which they returned after marriage to raise their families.

We have a tremendous number of beautiful old homesteads all over Leeds-Grenville and I am appalled at the great number that are up for sale, the great number that have been converted into multiple dwellings because the elderly who lived in them for the past 60 years or so can no longer afford to pay a heating bill that runs into hundreds and hundreds of dollars per year, or the hydro bill, or the cost of putting gasoline in their car to drive back and forth to town to see the family doctor, or buy the groceries needed to sustain themselves. These people do not want to give up their homes, but they have been put into a position of having to do so because the economy of this country is in such a tragic state.

The alternative is being forced to move into senior citizen housing where they have a room or a suite with a common recreation area. Certainly this accommodation is adequate but the choice, the freedom of choosing, is an option that has been taken away from them. Surely this is not what they deserve for having devoted their lives to raising the future citizens of this country.

I have spent many afternoons talking to senior citizens in Leeds-Grenville, visiting them in their apartments, rooms and homes. They tell me time and time again that they do not want to be put out to pasture like tired and faithful old horses. They tell me they want to remain productive and useful. They want to remain an important part of our society, a society they were instrumental in building. But without the necessary income, our senior citizens will not be able to continue participating in the activities of the community.

In my riding, and I know this is the case throughout the rest of the country, the elderly try to be active year round with outings on bus trips, seminars and social events. I would hate to see them have to curtail their activities simply because they no longer have that extra dollar or two to spend on these so-called luxuries. These people have knowledge and wisdom to offer us, gained through years of experience, and they should have the opportunity to do so. Instead, they are forced to sit at home and waste away. They should be able to grow old with dignity, not with despair.

In the past, the old age pension had been indexed to the rising cost of living in an attempt to enable pensioners to keep