

*Index for Senior Citizens*

If the hon. member for Regina West (Mr. Benjamin) prefers to speak anyway—and perhaps my colleague will table the document at the end of the debate—that is up to him. I think there is a way by which we can give hon. members an extra hour for dinner by tabling this document and by ending the debate. If that is done, I would be prepared to call it six o'clock.

**Mr. Benjamin:** Mr. Speaker, tabling it before or afterward evades a little matter in issue which has been apparent for a number of months. I could care less whether the parliamentary secretary tables it now, after I sit down or tomorrow. I do not know if he has the authority to do so. I think a cabinet minister would have to do that.

In any event, if I may continue, last December 10 the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre said, and I quote:

As the President of the Treasury Board will recall—

It was then the hon. member for York-Peel (Mr. Stevens).

—in October I raised with the Prime Minister the question of a special index for senior citizens related to the things they have to buy. Outside the House that day the President of the Treasury Board said he would give serious consideration to that proposal. May I ask if any action has yet been taken on that?

The then president of the Treasury Board replied:

—I am pleased to reply to that question. I did follow it up and a report has been prepared. If the hon. member feels that it would be helpful, I could either deliver it to him personally for his consideration or I could table the report in the House.

I put a motion for the production of papers on the order paper. The Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board said on June 11:

Madam Speaker, since the Treasury Board did not prepare any report on a special index for senior citizens. I would ask the hon. member to withdraw his motion.

I suppose in the height of technicality he was right, but since Statistics Canada was under the jurisdiction of the Treasury Board at that time and at the time the hon. member for York-Peel was in office, the parliamentary secretary was inadvertently and probably unavoidably in error, because he did not know that Statistics Canada, under the jurisdiction of the Treasury Board, had prepared the report.

The whole issue of special indexing for senior citizens for the things they have to buy in relation to their cost of living, in relation to the poverty line and in relation to increasing standards of living for the rest of society requires that there be thorough, authoritative and competent inquiries, investigations and studies into what it costs senior citizens to live and what it would cost to increase their standard of living in direct relationship to all other sectors of society, and if an index produced by Statistics Canada or any other agency of the government is insufficient, then there are many other sources to get such indices from. There are a number of social agencies in Canada outside government which have already done extensive work on this. This has been totally ignored by successive governments.

The OAS and the GIS were designed to ensure that retired Canadians would not fall below the poverty line, and even using the Statistics Canada poverty line, which is drawn much

lower than the poverty lines of social agencies, OAS and the GIS are not meeting this goal.

● (1710)

In fact, Mr. Speaker, when the minister introduced Bill C-16, she admitted that even with the additional \$35 increase in the guaranteed income supplement, some pensioners' incomes would only reach 80 per cent over the poverty line. There is no doubt that she said that—

—an income which is slightly lower than 80 per cent of the poverty line is not acceptable in a country as rich as ours and is certainly not enough to live on decently.

Most of us who are now working can expect a substantial decrease in our standard of living when we reach retirement. Our retirement income is so inadequate that half of all our senior citizens qualify for the guaranteed income supplement benefits, which has to tell you something about the old age security pension, the Canada pension and a host of private pensions.

More than six out of ten Canadians over the age of 65 have incomes under \$5,000, and three out of four women over the age of 65 are poor. Because of the ineffectiveness of the present indexing system, the Liberals have been forced to increase GIS payments twice in the last 18 months, by \$20 in January, 1979, and by \$35 in July of 1980. This piecemeal, band-aid approach to a program of economic survival for our elderly citizens condemns 60 per cent of them to "golden years" of bleak existence. Surely the OAS and GIS must be revised so they fulfil their original intention. I am confident that my good friend, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and my colleagues in the official opposition, will agree that that goal must be reached.

**Mr. Paproski:** Right.

**Mr. Benjamin:** It must be reached to ensure that all senior citizens remain above the poverty line, and preferably a standard of living above the poverty line which is designed by our social service agencies, which are more realistic and practical than the ones devised by government agencies have been to date.

On Bill C-16, the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) suggested a goal of 25 per cent above the poverty line, which one could hardly call overly generous. This would assure senior citizens of a standard of living which would allow a measure of comfort rather than mere survival. This, first and foremost, should be the basic goal of every member in this House.

Once that level is achieved, how should the pension be indexed? The current method of indexing quarterly to the CPI does not represent an increase. It merely keeps the pension up to date and provides some semblance of protection of the purchasing power of the dollar that senior citizens receive. The cost price index relates to the urban population of Canada and does not reflect the experience of any particular family or individual or of other segments of the population such as, would you believe, senior citizens.