

Volunteer Organizations

In my opinion, Mr. Speaker, what differentiates the voluntary worker from any other is precisely this element of working for nothing and self-sacrifice. The bona fide volunteer does not seek financial compensation, for his wages or salary consist in realizing that he is participating in the well-being of those around him.

If, on the other hand, we are talking about tax incentives, that is something else again. We know that the give-and-take proposition led to a study on the possibility of offering tax credits in exchange for charitable gifts. The Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) has made a note of all recommendations received and I have the impression that the establishment of such credits remains a valid option. However it does require further consideration, for we must at least assess the indirect impact such a step might have. Be that as it may, the first steps have been taken and the matter is under active consideration.

In concluding, Mr. Speaker, I would say that the intent of the motion is commendable but, as I see it, should Parliament seek additional information there are plenty of reports or surveys and other documents. Thanks to all the work done, this sector is now gaining even wider recognition.

● (1820)

[English]

Mr. Peter Peterson (Hamilton West): Mr. Speaker, the motion of the Hon. Member for Argenteuil-Papineau (Mrs. Bourgault), that the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs be empowered to study and report on the volunteer sector, deserves careful consideration. As has been pointed out earlier in this debate, the voluntary sector is a key element of our society. Its strength lies in its freedom of action and its self-sufficiency. It is interesting to compare the voluntary sector in this country with that which exists in some other parts of the world. In some countries, where full democracy is not a way of life, voluntary organizations are very circumscribed in what they may do. Fortunately, Canada is characterized by a sector that adds appreciably to the quality of life of our citizens. However, its social and financial impact is elusive and that explains the desire to examine the sector from a closer vantage point.

The national household survey on volunteer activity, which the Department of the Secretary of State and Statistics Canada are undertaking, should help to clarify many aspects of voluntarism including economic, social, and even philosophical and psychological, if you consider factors such as the motivations which lead people to volunteer.

Parliamentarians have various opportunities at present to question Ministers about the voluntary action aspect of their portfolios. The Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, for instance, allows us to put questions to the Secretary of State (Mr. Bouchard) seeking clarification on that Department's many dealings with the voluntary sector. We do this in the framework of the departmental estimates, and have always received co-operation from the departmental officials

in supplying us with whatever additional materials we may require. A mechanism thus exists for us to examine Government links with voluntarism in this way.

The question of offering fiscal or other compensation to volunteers and their organizations is an interesting one. One may note that many volunteers are not interested in receiving compensation for their services, that their motives are completely philanthropic and humanitarian. For many volunteers, the fact of helping someone in need or serving the community is compensation enough. Compensation could raise the spectre of bureaucratic mechanisms for allocating it, which would be anathema to the sector which, after all, is built on the free spirit I have referred to.

Fiscal incentives to organizations are already being looked at, as has been indicated earlier in the debate. The Government has received the benefit of the views of a great many organizations, all offering their viewpoints and suggestions as to how fiscal incentives should work. I understand that discussions took place between the Secretary of State and the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) before the Budget and that discussions are continuing.

It is interesting to note Gallup's findings when they polled on tax incentives. Fifty-four per cent of the respondents were unaware of the existence of tax incentives to encourage charitable giving. Awareness increased with income-education level and white collar occupations. There was also a correlation between performance of volunteer work and the incidence of charitable donations. Fifty-five per cent considered the current tax treatment of donations as fair and 28 per cent thought it unfair. Fifty-one per cent of this latter group named low income people as being disadvantaged by the tax treatment and another 8 per cent said the system favoured big donors in high income brackets. That was in a November, 1984 survey, so it is still reasonably current and probably still reflects attitudes. It provides food for thought for Parliamentarians and voluntary organizations alike.

One might well ask, Mr. Speaker, what the voluntary sector thinks of being studied and surveyed. We have at least one answer to that question. Last year Drs. J. J. Rice, David Ross, and Jean-Bernard Robichaud carried out a national consultation at the request of the Department of the Secretary of State. They conducted 100 three-hour interviews with persons interested in voluntary action across Canada to see what their requirements were and to determine their support for studies which would clarify the social and financial impact of voluntarism. In addition to the interviews, this team sent out and analysed 400 questionnaires to voluntary organizations. The result was a clear call for undertaking national surveys. Knowing that the sector itself is interested in such surveys is encouraging to researchers and Government departments which help fund such research.

I am personally very encouraged by the kinds of studies which are already being done by and on behalf of the voluntary sector. The pace of research is indeed accelerating, and I am of the view that present means and methods are adequate