

Old Age Security

Mr. Donald M. Fleming (Eglinton): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Martin) has chosen a new role for himself today. Usually, when the minister speaks in the house, he adopts the air of one who is announcing the advent of a new heaven and a new earth. His speech today was of a different nature. On the whole it was a most depressing speech. The information which the minister sought to recount must have had a most depressing effect on everyone who had come here with any hope of action on the part of the government or parliament in the near future.

In his speech the minister in effect sought to justify the existing old age pension system. His whole speech was in essence a defence of the status quo. He praised what he called the liberality of the present system. His words in connection with the means test—whether he so intended them or not I cannot say—were in essence a defence of the means test. The minister's statement leaves one wondering what possible purpose the committee can serve, because it would appear that the government has completely prejudged the situation and the committee must face a role of utter futility. I think a fair summing up of the speech the minister made this afternoon would be that the case for the appointment of a committee with any hope of performing a constructive or useful task is weaker now than it was before he started to speak.

From the resolution one would infer that the committee is to be a sort of fact-finding body. There are several things that the committee is to be permitted to examine and study. If it is information that is sought, I suggest that that information is available now. The minister has catalogued a good deal of information of a rather depressing sort, and it is quite apparent that when this committee is set up it will have to go to the same sources for its information as those from which the minister obtained his, namely, the officials of the department.

It is not more information that is required on this subject. I will put it briefly: what is required is resolute action on the part of the government. There is plenty of information available. All the information in the hands of the government today could be made available to the house by means of a white paper, in a speech or by some other method. It is not more information that is the great need in this field at the present moment.

The minister has sought to put some information before the house looking to the present and to the future, information as to the situation both in Canada and in countries abroad, particularly in the sister nations of the commonwealth to which he referred. Again I say

the committee will have to obtain all its information from government sources; there is no suggestion that the committee will seek firsthand information from the other countries of the commonwealth. I say to you, Mr. Speaker, that if that is all this committee is to be permitted to do, it is not going to have a useful or successful role.

Questions of law and the constitution have been introduced by the minister. Where is the committee to go for instruction on those points? It will have to obtain it from the law officers of the crown, if the law officers of the crown are to be permitted to come before the committee and submit to questioning. All this is available to the government now and can be made available to the house in five minutes if the government has not been neglecting the preparation of information.

I sum up my approach to this subject by saying that what is needed right now is not more information—there is ample information available; what is needed is action. We have been waiting for action on the part of the government for a very long time.

Let us in all fairness examine the proposal with respect to the functions and powers and purposes of the proposed committee. Its shortcomings are manifest.

In the first place, its scope is very narrow. It is to be confined to the subject of old age security. It is not to be permitted to inquire into questions of security for those who are disabled and prevented from obtaining a livelihood just as are those who are advanced in years. The minister talked about the danger of action with reference to old age pensions prejudicing or precluding action in other fields of social security; and he referred to health insurance. Would it not have been the part of common sense, if the minister is seriously hoping for the results he pictured from this committee, to enlarge the scope of the committee so that it could take that broad and well-balanced view of the situation that it must take if the matter is to be considered in any other way than that characterized by this government's approach to social security questions in the past, which has prevented a thorough and comprehensive solution, namely, a piecemeal approach and piecemeal politics? What is needed is a comprehensive approach to the problem, and this committee with its limited scope will not provide the opportunity to make a comprehensive study of social security.

In the second place, I would point out that the committee will be too large. There are to be twenty-eight members from this house, and, as it is to be a joint committee, presumably the other place will appoint a similar number. A committee of fifty-six members