

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the previous speaker from Fraser Valley East talked about a number of issues on which I want to comment. I also have a question for him.

The hon. member commented briefly on the opting out issue. Canadians should understand that the opting out provision he is talking about has nothing to do with the question that has been raised by this government in its policy or in fact by the proposals the government intends to bring forward.

The opting out was a ploy by the Reform Party simply to get press attention. It had absolutely nothing to do with a legitimate option. The Prime Minister did say if members want to opt out of the pension plan he would allow it. It is not being proposed for members of Parliament.

Second, the member says we should lead by example and that we should have no special privileges. I think that is a fair statement to have made. However, members of Parliament on all sides were elected knowing what the compensation package was and knowing that the Liberal Party had proposed two changes to the current government pension program. The first change was to end double dipping. The second change was to reconsider the age at which members of Parliament would qualify to receive benefits.

Members of Parliament knew that. They ran for public office knowing what the compensation was specified to be.

Now members are saying there should not be special privileges. I wonder if the member would agree that in fact it is not a special privilege but a right of any member of Parliament to know what their compensation is, what they are running for, and what they are going to have to plan for. I wonder if the member of Parliament, the previous speaker, would care to say what exactly he feels members of Parliament should be paid and if in fact, as he suggests, there should be no pension plan or something comparable to what is offered in corporate life.

It is only fair that Canadians understand that there is a compensation requirement.

Mr. Strahl: Madam Speaker, a couple of points were raised, one being that certainly members on the one hand should know what they are running for when they seek candidacy. We ran under one set of rules. We are going to change them. They are in flux so they are going to change.

I do not think there is anything wrong with changing them on the fly, as it were. I think Canadians have been demanding that. Polling will indicate that this is a very poorly received plan as it currently stands.

The other thing is on compensation. I know the members across the way have consistently tried to make some hay out of this but the Reform Party has never felt that the pay package is too generous for members of Parliament. It is the pension plan.

Supply

Again and again we say we are talking about the pension plan which is too generous the way it stands and six years is too quick to make that much benefit.

Mr. Ted McWhinney (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Madam Speaker, this has been a valuable and informative debate because the government is committed to reform of the pension plan. It has taken this commitment by members of the government party very seriously and we are in the stage of discussion and dialogue and testing out ideas. It is quite clear that this problem can be resolved before the next general election.

Although hypothetical cases have been cited of members who could resign tomorrow and acquire large pensions, I do not think anybody is contemplating resignation at this stage. We have the time and we have to do this thoroughly.

It is also agreed that salaries and pensions are part of the same package and there is some disposition to think that members are underpaid but may be overgenerously treated in pensions.

• (1345)

That is the sort of balance the government must and will consider. Be assured of the one general consideration today that we act in the sense of doing equity to everybody and that members of Parliament suffer with the general public. Therefore in approaching the reforms we have considerations of this sort well in mind.

Some aspects were discussed during the election campaign. If they were not discussed in government papers they were raised at all-candidates meetings. It is interesting to note the consensus that develops easily enough on these considerations.

It is agreed that it is unjust for members of Parliament to receive pensions on retirement from the House while still young, active, healthy and able to engage in other activities. A commencement age at 55, I would have said 60 or 65, whatever the regular national pension scheme finally may be is correct and is equitable. That is certainly within the government's consideration.

The double dipping issue was raised during the election. All of us agree that the flagrant examples, and there have been several of them cited, are ones that arouse genuine public concern. Even if numerically they are not very large they do raise the issue of justice not merely being done but not being seen to be done. Equity must be done to all citizens. If there is one case of a former MP taking a large government job at an inflated salary then people are justifiably saying that is not right.

There are some complications in relation to this. I do not think they are insuperable. I think a member opposite said double dipping reaches only within the area of federal sovereignty. Sovereignty of course is indivisible. I myself would be interested in testing a declaratory judgment whether a ban on double dipping could not reach to pensions of members who have served in provincial houses or possibly at the municipal level. I raise this as a theoretical point, but theoretical questions can and