

Old Age Security Act Amendment

● (5:20 p.m.)

Then, he went on to speak about the difficulties in his own province. I read further from what he said:

In the second place, down through the years we have always clamped a pretty severe test upon old age pensioners in that there was such an extremely low allowable income.

He continued to develop that argument.

I have placed before you now, sir, the statements made and the attitudes expressed by leading members of the four parties in the house in the fall of 1951, and I say to this House of Commons: why should we now change the system which was arrived at in that year, a system whereby the means test was abolished and old age pensions were given as of right? It cannot be argued today that the men of that particular period did not have plenty of experience behind them as to the inequities of the means tests and the administrative difficulty of putting it into effect. I well remember in the days before I entered this chamber, during the short period when I served in the Manitoba Legislature, hearing innumerable cases of people applying for old age pensions and being subjected to the humiliating experience of having to disclose their incomes, their possessions, their resources and so on.

I was as happy as anyone was in the parliament of 1951 when that bill passed and the means test was abolished. The bill did not occupy much of the time of the house. It was considered on October 25. Then the house went into committee, and in two days in November the issue was concluded. Unanimous consent was given at each stage, and there was very little debate except during the clause by clause study of the bill in committee of the whole.

That was the situation 15 years ago. Yet here we have the Minister of National Health and Welfare seeking to reimpose a system which was found to be inadequate 15 years ago. I wish the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Martin) were here to participate in the debate on this issue. I should like to ask him whether he agrees with what he said in 1951 or whether he has reversed his stand. I wonder what he said in cabinet when this bill came up for consideration by the cabinet. Did he tell his colleagues that everything he said in 1951 was unsound and should never have been brought into effect? Is he one who would advocate the reimposition of a means test after the introduction of this very useful bill in 1951 for which the Liberal party took a great deal of credit and, indeed, it deserved credit for such a forward step?

Now we are having a retrograde step, a turning back of the clock with the imposition on the elderly citizens of this country of a means test to which they should not be subjected. All this nonsense about calling it just an income test in filling out a simple form, evades the issue. There should be old age pensions without a means test, as a matter of right. If one looks back at past debates on this subject one finds that some people talked about old age pensions as a national dividend to which people were entitled after 50 years of service to their country, in some capacity or other, during the course of their lifetime.

No one can deny at the present time that there should be an increase in the amount of money available for old age pensioners because of the rising cost of living. We have suggested an over-all increase of \$25 a month without a means test to avoid the administrative difficulties. The minister has tried to make political capital out of this by saying that his proposal is \$30 a month, a higher figure that we are suggesting. However, the minister is excluding quite a number of people and is imposing a humiliation on half a million or more of our old age pensioners.

The minister wants them to disclose whether or not they have been financially successful in life. In this society of ours success in life is sometimes measured by financial results. This is the type of society in which we live. Now, the minister wants these people to sit down and confess that they have not been as financially successful as their neighbours, and therefore they will get a hand-out of another \$15, \$20 or \$30 a month. The implication is that if they had done something differently when they were in their twenties or thirties, they would not have to get this extra money now.

I suggest to you, Mr. Speaker, that people 70 years of age and over have made their full contribution to the life and development of this country and suffered accordingly in so doing because many of them did not get the wages or salaries to which they were entitled. That is why I have participated again in this debate. I think it is essential that we have the background to this whole issue; that we know what was done in the past and that, before this debate is concluded, we should have a really satisfactory explanation from the government as to why this change is now being suggested.

I do not think the proposed change is soundly based on the financial situation in