

Housewives' Allowance

continuing evolution of our income maintenance policy is an idea I wholeheartedly support. In my opinion, the motion before us is related to this idea, and I hope to be able to show that to you today. The needs of children, the needs of parents and the responsibilities of parents in meeting children's needs will be receiving considerable attention by the minister and by the Department of National Health and Welfare within the next few months.

First, I would like to point out that the use of the term "housewife" in the motion raises an important issue of definition. It seems to me necessary to take into account that there are the single parent families which in most cases, whether they remain at home or enter the labour market, receive a level of income below their needs. The majority of this population are women who remain at home and receive transfer payments. If they enter the labour market they are unable to earn sufficient income to live, to meet employment expenses, and to cover the necessary child care costs. These women do a considerable amount of work in the home. They make do without many conveniences; they nurture dependent children, but they cannot or do not want to be classified as "housewives"—maybe nurturers of children would be the appropriate term.

Many needy families are one parent families. The term "housewife" is not always relevant to them. To target a program to "housewives" would surely invite considerable and justified criticism from those who are charged with the responsibility of taking care of a family but are not "wives"—be they single women, single men or married men. I would imagine that a motion which replaced the word "housewives" by the words "parents with dependent children" would be better received by this House.

Second, I would like to clarify to this House that the main concern of what may loosely be called "family support" is, in my mind, the care and well-being of children. This is not to say that childless families never merit support; but rather that incremental redistribution of income which this government is considering is targeted to groups with identified special needs. The responsibility to ensure adequate care for children creates one of those special needs we have identified. Conversely, other special needs of certain childless families are addressed by other policies and programs.

The case can be made that the responsibility for children creates particular needs in families. It is much harder to build a case to the effect that housework in and by itself creates special needs. After all everyone is in one way or another engaged in housework. Therefore housework does not have a proper place in the discussion regarding income distribution between families. Admittedly, housework has a role in the discussion of the distribution of income within the boundaries of the family. This is another subject and I do not believe the motion we are addressing today touches upon that subject.

At present there is a virtually infinite range of alternatives for people to organize the distribution of tasks within the home from total specialization to total sharing including alteration of roles and so forth. It would be senseless and very unwelcome

from the point of view of the population to interfere with those choices.

Third, and assuming that we are in fact discussing the special needs of parents during their child rearing years, it seems useful to distinguish between material support for the child rearing function and recognition of the social importance of that function. Both subjects are of great concern to me. Unfortunately the first is a more straightforward problem than the second. Let me begin by saying a few words on the issue of recognition, and I will return later to the issue of material support.

Many proponents of payment for parents at home have advanced the argument that the role of child rearing does not meet with proper recognition in our society, and that it is one of the responsibilities of the state to ensure that proper recognition is awarded. I say that this is one of the more problematic of the two concerns because it is neither clear that government intervention can prescribe the gain or loss of prestige of any individual or profession, nor is it clear that a monetary compensation would achieve any such desired goals. These two things are also interrelated. Prestige has traditionally been the result of a combination of qualities, among which money always had a role. The role of money, in recent years, has become more and more central in our society to the definition of prestige or recognition, to the point that some argue that only payment for services rendered is adequate recognition. Although this position has some merit in a society so heavily market oriented as is ours it remains unconvincing to many who argue that certain roles in society, among which child rearing is prominent, are privileged in that they contain intrinsic and otherwise non-monetary rewards.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Like being a member of parliament.

Mr. Robinson: That may be so.

In this regard our society seems to have come to some collective decisions without careful examination of alternatives. It is not clear to many observers that engulfing every person in the monetary and market scheme of things is a worth-while social objective. There are many different opinions and nuances voiced on this issue at this point in time, and to pretend to be able to find a solution to the problem of recognition through a monetary compensation scheme is premature. Nevertheless, let me repeat with emphasis that the issue of proper recognition of the child rearing function in our society is at the centre of this government's concern with the status of women. That is a subject on which I welcome further discussion.

The increasing sense of financial insecurity of parents who choose to remain outside the labour market due to marital breakdown, discontinuity of employment, loss of labour force skills and other related phenomena, is a mounting concern of this government. Recent and proposed changes in divorce laws and pension regulations address some of these issues. But then again this subject, as vitally important as it is, is not the issue raised by the motion under discussion.