

Senior Citizens

independent study of the kinds of structures that might be most effective as a focus for concerns about aging at the national level, that the National Advisory Council on Aging, mentioned earlier, was established. The majority of the members of the Council are older persons. They and their peers have proven themselves quite capable of identifying the needs of senior citizens. The possibility that a Senior Citizens' Commission, as proposed in the Bill before us, would contribute anything of significance to the many efforts already under way appears unlikely.

The paradox in respect to the older population is the tendency to view success as a problem. It is a particularly frustrating irony that progress in man's search for a longer life should produce the "problems of aging". In fact, the very successes in economic, social, medical and industrial progress that now permit such a large number of people to reach old age have also produced the changes that make elderly people a generally "dependent" group and have robbed them of their most important and traditional functions, roles and statuses.

Since World War II, scientific and technological advances with increasing industrialization have changed both the way people live and the ways by which they earn their living. The impact of population growth, urbanization and industrialization on the lives of older people has been heightened by the fact that these changes are occurring rapidly. Coupled with these rapid changes has been a new phenomenon—retirement. For the first time in the history of the world, thousands of persons each year leave the labour force and enter retirement. But it is here that difficulties have arisen. The right of persons to spend their later adult years not tied to the demands and responsibilities of the working world has become accepted, but we have failed to take steps to provide people with systematic preparation for their retirement years. Preparation for adulthood, and particularly for work, is an institutionalized part of the system; preparation for the later adult years is left to the individual, and as a result is haphazard and often incomplete.

With the end of the work role, the value of the older person's contribution to the family, the church, the neighbourhood and voluntary associations has been downgraded. Society has developed negative attitudes toward the aged and the aging. Older people now carry these attitudes, developed earlier in life, into their own retirement with the result that they have negative attitudes about themselves and their peers. The previous speaker spent some time in his speech talking about these negative attitudes. I think he was very correct as far as he went in that regard.

Overcoming the negative attitude society has concerning the aged and the aging is the challenge we face. Like all age groups, older people have problems and we must continue our efforts to solve them. But we must not allow our efforts to aid the helpless to become synonymous with the whole spectrum of aging. Stress on the negative side of aging has contributed to the stereotypes and the myths which have grown around it. Most of us have in some way contributed to the false picture that has been created.

Until we come to terms with our own aging and accept it, we will continue to endow the later years with all the misconceptions and untruths that society has built up, particularly over the past 30 to 40 years—insidious and ultimately dangerous in terms of society's acceptance of its older citizens. There are older people, many who are frail and not in the best of health, who are demonstrating that chronological age, in itself, is a meaningless measure. They continue to contribute to society, to their families and to grow as individuals. When we see them, aging takes on a new dimension. Mr. Speaker, we all know such people and indeed there are a few in this House of Commons.

But changes in attitudes cannot be legislated. These will only come about through teaching in the homes, the schools and in the training of professionals who will be working in the community with the aged as well as other age groups. Each of us as individuals has a responsibility in this. Older people themselves have a responsibility. Increasingly, they will have to demonstrate that they remain socially responsive and responsible, that they can and do continue to contribute to society, that there are new roles which they are willing and able to assume. We have to help them find these new roles. We have to provide the aged themselves with opportunities to do so.

● (1600)

The forthcoming Conference on Aging mentioned earlier, which is being convened by the Minister of National Health and Welfare and will involve the federal, provincial and territorial Governments, as well as the non-governmental sector in its planning, has been designated as a working conference. It has two major goals: to address the issues of most urgent concern in an aging society over the next 10 to 15 years and suggest proposals and strategies for consideration in resolving them; and also to consider the means whereby continuing dialogue and planning can be most effectively furthered.

The hard work before us now is finding solutions within our human and economic resources to the problems that have to be resolved if the needs of the aged are to be met. To the extent possible, duplication has to be avoided and statutory authority respected.

No one denies that there is much to be done. No one denies the challenge that faces us as such a large segment of our population continues to age. We must, however, deny that a Senior Citizens' Commission such as proposed in Bill C-521 can undertake the tasks that should be undertaken.

Mr. Neil Young (Beaches): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the Hon. Member for York-Sunbury (Mr. Howie) for giving the House the opportunity to discuss this very important matter. The Bill is rather straightforward and relatively simple. It calls for an Act that would be cited as the Senior Citizens' Commission Act. The major object of this Act would be to establish a Commission to study and identify the needs of senior citizens. Once those studies have been completed, the Commission would make recommendations to the Governor in Council with respect to the needs of seniors.