

Oral Questions

The number of food banks has increased from 1 to 292 during the past decade. This is not a statistic, but the sad truth. Today in Canada, we have children who depend on food banks for their meals. Even in a period of economic growth, there is a wide gap between rich and poor in this country.

When will the Prime Minister change his economic and social policies which have been a tragedy for Canadian children?

Hon. Benoît Bouchard (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, I am sorely tempted to compare the present situation with the recession in 1982. However, I can inform the hon. member for Hamilton East that the Prime Minister, the cabinet and the government had the courage to make certain choices and define certain policies. If 10 years ago, her government had had the courage to make political choices that would have allowed Canadians to make certain decisions today, we would not have had this \$400 billion debt we inherited from her government, which prevents us from financing all the programs we feel are necessary. Managing for tomorrow's generation means managing now.

• (1420)

[English]

Ms. Sheila Copps (Hamilton East): Madam Speaker, I read in the paper yesterday that the Prime Minister spends almost \$1 million a year on press clippings.

I would like to ask the Prime Minister, who has been in office seven and a half years during periods of strong economic growth world wide, why he is hiding behind the issue of the recession when in fact the unbelievable increase in the number of children eating at food banks did not just occur during the recession, it occurred during the life of this government.

Does the Prime Minister understand that his policies have created an underclass of Canadians which is growing in bad times and in good?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Madam Speaker, I tell my hon. friend what I am sure she knows, that her prefatory remarks are false in regard to expenditures on my behalf.

My hon. friend says: "I read it in the paper". That does not mean it is true. It is a false statement.

With regard to the serious question my hon. friend raises, when we were sworn into office in 1984-85 the total federal government spending record on programs for children was \$6.7 billion. That has now increased to \$9.5 billion, an annual increase of 5.2 per cent even though the cost of all program increases was 3.9 per cent.

The government has consistently spent more, either than the average of inflation or the average increase of all programs, on children and on children's programs than on anything else, with the possible exception of the amount we have expended on natives which have increased even more substantially than the numbers I have given my hon. friend.

The Minister of National Health and Welfare has just indicated, I think properly, that we had to make some fundamental decisions in respect of lessening the burden on our children today. That means making sure we hand over to them an economy that is not burdened down even further by a mountain of debt so that they are able to make their own priorities and build their own lives.

Meanwhile the government will continue to expend greater and greater amounts of money to help children and families in need because that of course is a fundamental obligation of this House and of all governments.

Mr. David Walker (Winnipeg North Centre): Madam Speaker, my question is for the Prime Minister.

Hidden away in yesterday's report on food banks is the startling fact that 450,000 Canadians are living together in total poverty in traditional two parent families. These same families are excluded from any new cash under the child benefit package. Thousands of these families run out of money each month and their children are forced to line up at food banks.

Why is it that these children want to save Canada when Canada refuses to save them?

Hon. Benoît Bouchard (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, I explained that to the same member yesterday. We are doing as much as we can in whatever capacity we have to do something. We have already put \$15 billion into various programs.

I know that when we talk about resources it does not interest the Liberal Party, it never did. That is why today we have to put 35 per cent of our revenue on the debt payment. It is a reality.