

Government Orders

The Minister of Human Resources Development and Minister of Western Economic Diversification has informed us that he intends to hold broad public consultations on social program reform. The government has given itself two years to review social programs and make changes in a manner which, as it promised repeatedly during the election campaign, takes into account the concerns of the people.

• (1600)

Many Quebecers and Canadians are afraid of what the government has in mind for social programs. They are afraid that the government, under the pretext of getting public finances in order, will slash the only social safety net they have.

The upcoming social program review scares many disadvantaged people and those who are suffering because of the sluggish economic recovery. It scares unemployed persons, welfare recipients, low and middle income families, senior citizens and, of course, disabled persons.

All of these people are currently facing a great deal of uncertainty as to the availability of quality occupational training to help them integrate the labour force and gain access to the health care and social services they desperately need.

According to the *Office des personnes handicapées du Québec*, in 1986, there were ten times as many disabled persons living in a residential setting as there were disabled persons in an institutional setting. More than one third of the population over the age of 75 is considered disabled and overall, there are more women than men who are disabled.

The challenge facing the government is, therefore, complex. On one hand, all Quebecers and Canadians want the government to tackle the employment problem. Citizens who want to use their skills and experience to make a contribution to society find nothing noble about unemployment and welfare. Finding work is a priority for disabled persons, particularly for those not confined to an institution because of their disability.

Disabled persons often encounter obstacles such as discriminatory hiring and promotion practices. Yet, many disabled persons are highly qualified and functional. Why not call upon these individuals who want to participate in the economic development and modernization of Quebec and Canada.

Disabled persons also face problems in other areas such as training, transportation, communications and housing, areas in which most Canadians take fairness for granted.

Most of these areas come under provincial jurisdiction and we believe that the federal government has no business interfering any more than it now does in such matters. We think that the money allocated by the federal government to these programs

for the handicapped must be transferred to the provinces, which are a lot closer to the needs of their population.

We think there is an increasingly urgent need for Quebec to create institutions that unite us, based on our needs and not on standards imposed by the rest of Canada that do not always take into account our economic, cultural and social situation. The duplication and overlap problem is costly and so complex that the average person is easily lost. The competition among governments on service quantity but not quality has resulted in waste, the rule being that the federal government takes up as much room as possible without regard for costs.

Cuts in transfer payments to the provinces for health care may translate into budget cuts in home-care and rehabilitation centers.

• (1605)

Quebec and the other provinces will be forced to slash their health care services. The government must not be allowed to make the provinces bear the burden of its deficit and shoulder the blame for these cuts.

The lack of funds in the health care system affects not only the availability of occupational therapy and physiotherapy services but also the home support program for people with disabilities.

Are we to think that cuts to social programs will lead to a reduction in efforts to make public buildings accessible to people using wheelchairs since, as the humorist Jean-Marc Parent was saying, there are always doors that open on the wrong side and 90 degree access ramps?

Despite their significant presence in our society, there is still too little research on the social integration of people with handicaps or functional disabilities. While we are scraping the bottom of the barrel to offer concrete and direct services to the population, can we afford to have two of everything? In 1993-94, the overall administration of federal and provincial health and welfare programs accounts for over \$150 million and more than 1,500 full-time jobs.

Can we afford to duplicate initiatives aimed at target groups with occasionally conflicting priorities? These are areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction and the federal government is merely trying to raise its political profile.

In 1991, only \$46 million was spent on programs for the handicapped over five years or a little over \$9 million a year. According to Statistics Canada, between 12 and 13 per cent of Canadians have various disabilities; it may be a mobility impairment, a vision, hearing or speech problem, an intellectual deficiency or a mental illness. As the figures clearly show, the time and energy spent on duplicating programs for the handicapped are not only costing us a lot of money but also lowering