

Social Policy

Mr. Alexander: There speaks the hon. member for one of the Saskatchewan ridings—we might as well mention it, Battledford-Kindersley—to show his disregard for our senior citizens. What I would like to say is this: perhaps the minister and her officials need to take a sabbatical and travel around the country as some of us have done to find out just what are the real needs of the senior citizens. It seems to me the minister and her officials are developing policy in Ottawa without knowing what things are like in the real world. They have no idea of the monstrosity they created when they brought in this spouse's allowance.

I recall that we expressed concern at the time the bill was debated. We did so on the grounds that it was discriminatory. Spinsters and bachelors who reach the age of 60 are not eligible for benefit. There is an even worse aspect. In the first instance, the government indicated, in defence of its proposal, that two people could not live on one pension. But when one of the couple dies, the surviving spouse is supposed to live on no pension at all. This is one of the cruelest hoaxes perpetrated since I became a member of parliament. It is the worst piece of legislation I have ever read and it has no place on the statute books of our country.

● (1732)

I had the opportunity of going across this country and I want to put on the record some of the things about which our senior citizens are concerned. We have the Minister of State for Urban Affairs (Mr. Ouellet)—I do not know what he is doing but he seems to be butting into provincial jurisdiction half the time—and we have the Minister of State for Fitness and Amateur Sports (Mrs. Campagnolo), but it is becoming increasingly evident that since the proportion of senior citizens in our population is growing at a rapid pace because people are living longer, there is a requirement for a special minister to be appointed to look after the needs of senior citizens.

It has been suggested to me on my tour that it is time we started to think about such a minister because the number of senior citizens is growing for various reasons, whether owing to better diet, improved medical technology or for other reasons. This means that in the long run there will be more senior citizens, with all the problems that go with them, and that it is high time we started to think about our priorities in terms of a separate department to look after their needs.

Somebody will say, I am sure, that we, a party which always talks about restraint, perhaps should not be proposing ways of spending more money. But let me point out that these are important priorities, and when we see a priority arise in terms of the needs of our senior citizens, we should be prepared to act. When I went across this country I found a need for such a ministry. Surely if we have a minister to look after fitness and amateur sports—and I am not taking anything away from that minister—and a minister to look after small business, we should also have a minister to look after this very important sector of our population, namely, our senior citizens. At present their needs are looked after by three or four ministers.

This is unfair, unjust and cruel. That is my first suggestion, Mr. Speaker.

What else have I found on my tour, sir? I will read the following comments regarding housing accommodation. There is a great deal of resentment among senior citizens who would like to live in their own homes rather than be shunted off to senior citizens' homes, no matter how excellent they may be. Senior citizens would like to have money in order to pay their taxes and to pay for heating and maintenance, which cost such exorbitant sums at this time that they must sometimes sell their homes.

In my view, it would be much cheaper to have a form of subsidization to look after these matters than to build senior citizens' homes en masse which, incidentally, cost more than the amount which would be allocated to look after the problems referred to. In other words, senior citizens are demanding more choices. This makes sense. Many of our senior citizens have owned their homes for years, but in their twilight years they cannot maintain their homes, paint them, cut the grass, heat them. These are the sort of services which they need. That is why I say we should take action in that area. If we are cost conscious at all, let us think of the millions of dollars that would be saved if we had programs under which our senior citizens could live in the places they themselves built and furnished and in which they raised their children, programs which would enable them to live the balance of their lives in dignity. Of course, such an idea would escape the imagination of this callous, cold, inept government.

I heard the hon. member for Ottawa-Vanier say—and if I am wrong, he will check me—that he does not like the idea of people working after the age of 65. I myself think there is some merit in people over 65 working. These people do not work because they love work although, mind you, they really appreciate the work ethic. They work because they have the need to work, either because of their own personal needs or because of the commitments they made on behalf of their wives, their children and their grandchildren. The inequity which came about as the result of this government's attitude is that they cut off these people from unemployment insurance. That was a terrible day. The government said it would save them—I am not sure of the figure—about \$50 million. Then there was the question whether they were ripping off the system.

Mr. Gauthier (Ottawa-Vanier): Mr. Speaker, I wish to rise on a point of order. I want to make it clear that I never said what the hon. member just attributed to me. I spoke French and the translation might have been incorrect. I will repeat in English what I said. I said that some people would like us to reduce the age of eligibility for OAS from 65 to 60 with a means test. I do not agree with the means test. That is what I said. I never said anything about the capacity for work of older people. As a matter of fact, I am one of those who encourage them to work.

Mr. Alexander: As I was saying, with regard to unemployment insurance, the government destroyed the initiative of