"Once in a while a worthy and inexpensive innovation comes along on Parliament Hill. The Court Challenges Program was one. Seven years ago the federal government started this program to provide funding for deserving but powerless groups to challenge federal laws and policies under the language and equality rights guarantees of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. There was something in this sensible program for everyone. For women, the elderly, the disabled and ethnic minorities, the funding finally meant access to an effective tool: test cases of individual rights under the charter. For government and all Canadians, there was a chance to build up jurisprudence and guidance in the application of equality rights. Despite the demonstrated usefulness of this program, the federal government remains intractable in the decision to cancel".

• (1800)

I want to assure the government that this issue is not going to go away. As the Official Opposition we in the Liberal Party are not going to stand idly by and watch this program die. Human rights groups are not going to accept this decision either.

This afternoon we heard the minister of multiculturalism go on at length about how great this program is and how well it works. He even suggested that there is still a need for something like the Court Challenges Program. Why? Why, if it works so well, and if there is still a need for it, is it being cancelled?

He suggested that he is looking for ideas of creative, innovative alternatives to the program. He wants to reinvent the wheel and have someone else pay for it. I want to say to the minister that we in the Liberal Party are not interested in participating in the government's face-saving effort.

There is no need for alternatives when we have a program that works perfectly well, is cost efficient and when there is still a great need for this program. We call on the government to do the right thing and reinstate this program immediately.

Hon. Gerry Weiner (Minister of Multiculturalism and Citizenship): Madam Speaker, the member for Hamilton Mountain has claimed that somebody on this side spoke of having enough jurisprudence.

Nobody ever said that we have enough jurisprudence. That is not a word we use. The member for Cape Breton—The Sydneys talked about the Solicitor General saying that we have sufficient jurisprudence. Those are words that were never used.

We have said there is a significant body of jurisprudence. Just to set the record straight—I know if the Solicitor General were here, he would want to put this on the record—what he has said very clearly is this: "We think that now is the time for other levels of government, the Canadian bar and other non-governmental bodies to which most of the current court challenges pertain, to take a hand and participate in the funding of these matters. The program, we feel, has come to an end as far as this level of government is concerned. It has served the purpose and we think it is up to other groups to come forward at this time to participate in the program".

I always agree with the Solicitor General. Where is leadership? It is not just to say: "Put the money back", money that the finance minister has had in a very, very difficult time to find in one place and another so that we are able to cut taxes by cutting expenses, not by trying to increase the debt and passing it on to future generations.

If you were in touch with your constituents, you might find how well received that budget has been this time. I tell you, we are getting nothing but commendations for the magnificent work of this finance minister.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Weiner: You have not been back home in such a long time, it will be a surprise for you when you do get there.

Leadership is not to say: Put back what is taken away. Leadership is to recognize that we have something that was excellent. With all the representations that have come in from the bar association, from non-governmental organizations, from new provincial governments that may very well have an interest to participate, why not let them all come forward and create a new model. It will not necessarily be something which says: If government will not do it, it cannot be done at all. That is not leadership.

Ms. Phinney: Madam Speaker, sometimes it is the responsibility of the government to take over where an individual cannot. These are people who cannot afford to challenge these issues in court. That is what government is for. It is to help people who cannot help themselves. I have sat on the committee meetings when we have been listening to the witnesses to which I believe both the ministers in the House were invited but to which they were unable to go.