

Government Orders

I want to cite a statement made in the House. In a sense this gentleman is an officer of Parliament. We have entrusted to him the responsibility of overseeing human rights issues across Canada. That individual is Mr. Max Yalden. When challenged by certain members that this bill somehow is reverse discrimination and works against the interest of males, Mr. Yalden said that "far from falling behind, able-bodied males appear to be getting more than their proportionate share of hiring. Such data hardly convey a convincing portrait of reverse discrimination".

This bill does not take away from some people to give to others, it simply opens it up for all. It ensures that there is fair and equitable treatment.

We should discard the mythology. It is time to get rid of further divisions by somehow putting over here the plight of a male versus the plight of everybody else. We are all engaged in the enormous task of ensuring employment for all Canadians. The workplace is going through a transformation unlike any it has gone through in the history of human kind. With new technology, global competition and varieties of change, it is tough out there. The only way to succeed is to make the workplace and the job market equally accessible to everyone so all those talents will be put to work. One group should not be put on the sidelines and treated differently.

People ask how do we succeed as a country? How do we meet the challenge of a new workplace and avoid the phobia and fear which the Jeremy Rifkins are talking about? I sincerely believe that in today's age the key ingredient which really makes this country tick is its human resources. I may be biased because my department is named human resources, but I feel privileged to be given that responsibility. I see it as such an important element in making this country work. That means everybody has to work—not 50 per cent of the population, not 75 per cent; everybody has to be given the chance to liberate their talent, to free up their creative potential, to give full open choice for them to make the kind of contribution they can make in the workplace.

• (1530)

I will digress for a second, if I might. A few days ago I was asked a question by the member from Regina about the statistics that were tabled last week by StatsCanada on the falling income of Canadian families. It is worth repeating. It pointed out that increasingly the falling income is a product of the increasing lack of participation of women in the workplace, single mothers in the workplace. Over the last several years that participation rate has dropped by almost 15 per cent. That is one of the most significant causes of the falling income of the Canadian family, in particular families headed by women.

We as a government are trying to turn around and devote our efforts to changing the basic structures to prevent that kind of decline. We are looking at a serious initiative on child care, trying to work with provinces and aboriginal groups. We are rewriting our employment legislation to make it more available for women coming back into the workplace to get the tools they need. We are looking at how we can better support young people to get back into the workplace.

That is the kind of response to our evolution, which is not to throw up our hands in despair, not to retreat into the den wardens of the past and try to hang on to the shibboleths of 30 or 40 years ago, but to try to say we can do it, we can make a difference, we can take initiatives and we can pass a law like Bill C-64. That is what we are all about.

There is an impression being left in this debate that somehow this is working against the interests of the private sector and that private enterprise is going rise up in revolt if this bill passes.

If we look at statements made before the committee that my hon. friend from Winnipeg North very ably chaired, look at the organizations that have supported this bill. The Canadian Manufacturers' Association, the Canadian Bankers' Association, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce told the committee that they were convinced that employment equity is actually value added. These companies told the committee that they had discovered that diversity pays a major dividend. It does not cost them money, it makes them money. It gives them improved access to a greater number of highly qualified personnel to choose from. That is what employment equity is about.

Why do we go off running after rabbit tracks and trying to create smokescreens and trying to create a sense that somehow there is this widespread apprehension? It is even interesting to point out that when we look at the debate generated in Ontario during the campaign about the impact of employment equity, most of the employers in Ontario said they want the bill. Do not get trapped by some ideology. Do not get trapped into imported arguments that are taken from some fundamentalist group in the southern United States that thinks employment equity is next to the devil. Our business groups are saying—

Mr. Ian McClelland (Edmonton Southwest, Ref.): Why make it a law then?

Mr. Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, it is a little upsetting that the hon. member from wherever who arrived in the House about two minutes ago did not hear the first part of the speech where we pointed out why business said they need the law in order to make sure that everybody gets treated fairly.