

Family Allowances

To try to come to grips with the problem of poverty, it is crucial to understand the causes and effects of it. Contrary to popular belief in some circles, today's poverty is rarely caused simply by laziness. If we look at statistics we will realize that the greatest number of people living below the poverty line are working full time, but their full-time work does not produce enough income to meet their needs. There are loggers, fishermen, farmers and others who are seasonally employed, and then there are the elderly, the blind, the disabled, mothers of deserted families, and the young who are becoming more and more important in this category of poverty while this government is in charge. Perhaps less than 3 per cent of the people living in poverty are in that condition as a result of what might be described as laziness.

I am particularly concerned about the increasing and obvious evidence of the failure of welfare programs, which are increasingly costly and less and less effective, as weapons against poverty in Canada. That may be because the gradual development of poverty programs in this country is not guided by any over-all strategy or consistent goal. Rather, we have a jungle of programs developed in a patchwork manner, helter-skelter and unco-ordinated, and as a result nothing works.

The bill the minister has placed before the House is just another example of juggling a small patch in this patchwork of anti-poverty programs which, as far as I can tell, will do very little to come to grips with poverty. The minister has not said anything to make me believe differently.

We believe that reforms are required in the whole approach to poverty. As a party, we have stated this on many occasions in the past. Incentives need to be built into the anti-poverty program, and there is a need to emphasize the necessity of income development for individuals below the poverty line, as well as a need to assist all Canadians to develop the ability and the confidence to achieve greater income earning potential. Incentives are needed to encourage recipients to seek further employment or retraining. Programs which too often discourage such efforts must be reformed.

In the past we have spoken about an income development program the principles of which must be to create new incentives to encourage recipients to seek further employment or training; to establish a system which is fair for all those in need and perhaps re-assess completely the concept of universality. Some of these universal programs have become ineffective when applied to those in greatest need. I am glad to know the minister heard my last comment. She has spoken with liveliness and conviction of the program presented in this bill, saying that it will solve the problems of the poor. She specified particularly single mothers and elderly individuals.

● (1642)

If we look at the statistics again, we note that the poor have become poorer while the rich have become richer, and the gap is ever and ever widening. I want to ask the minister some questions in this particular regard. We know for example that in 1951 the lowest 20 per cent of income earners took 4.4 per cent of national income, while the highest 20 per cent took

42.8 per cent of the national income. After the implementation of the various welfare policies for which the minister, and for which the government she is part of is responsible, the 1976 comparable figures show that now 3.9 per cent of the national income goes to the group with the lowest 20 per cent of national income, and for the highest group the figure is 44 per cent.

If we are to believe these figures and I have no reason not to believe them—they are produced by a reputable body known as the National Council of Welfare, I ask the minister whether she can inform the House what she expects the effect of this particular measure to be on this income distribution to which I have made reference? That is what will be the percentage of national income going to the lowest 20 per cent as opposed to what it is now? Can she give us some idea what this figure would be and how she arrived at such a calculation? I will let the minister answer before asking the next question.

Miss Bégin: Mr. Chairman, on the description of poverty given by the hon. member for Athabasca, basically he is right except for one fact when he says, although he is saying it from his heart, that the gap is widening between the poor and the rich. Technically, that is not the description of poverty in Canada. If I take a scientific approach, at a time when some members use their heart, it is because the best way to attack poverty is to talk figures.

The gap is described as this: a constant trend over the last 30 years shows that the 20 per cent at the top of the socioeconomic scale live out of some 40-plus per cent of the revenues, and 20 per cent at the bottom of the scale live out of 4 per cent of the revenues.

As to the need to continue to fight poverty, I hope all hon. members agree in this House that is an urgent matter. However, in the last ten years absolute poverty in Canada, as given by the indicators of Statistics Canada, has been reduced from 20 per cent to 12 per cent. So there has been progress, and that is important to note. However, there is still a lot of work to do. The member refers to it quite properly when he speaks—I think he said it was hidden poverty. It is less flagrant, but it is still alive.

What it does in terms of redistribution is this. It will bring to families with children—and this is something which we have identified as one of the three most vulnerable groups in Canadian society—an additional \$300 million, to about 700,000 families who are living below the poverty line. In terms of a particular subgroup of this group, it will give \$106 million to single parent families. In other words, 87 per cent of all single parent families will receive some credit benefits, not necessarily the full credit because we have a decreasing scale. It is not a cut-off point at one level of income only. I think that is very important for both the subgroup of the single families and the families with children living below the poverty line in Canada.

As to a point which has nothing to do with the bill but which has to do with the social policy of the country, namely, the need to build in incentives to work in our welfare program, I do not know if the hon. member was referring to the problem