

Private Members' Business

In the area of corrections we talk about the problem of criminality and repeat offenders in our prison system, yet most Grade 1 teachers can identify the children who are going to have behaviour problems in Grade 5, who are going to be delinquents when they are 12 years old and who are going to be serving time in federal penitentiaries when they are 20 years old. We are unwilling to put in the kinds of resources necessary to see that that does not happen.

One of the proposals in this motion is for not only child protection services but an emergency hot line. It says that we should standardize our laws across this country. I think that is important, particularly as those laws relate to protection services, but I am also concerned that we must do more than standardize laws.

I want to emphasize how many of the problems we see in terms of the welfare of children and of adults are related to poverty. The government is proud that there has been a slight reduction in poverty in the last year. Poverty had gone up steadily since 1984, but in the last year it has gone down. Obviously this is related to employment rates. If unemployment goes down, poverty goes down.

However, we still have 1.2 million children who are living below the poverty level compared to countries like Sweden which has approximately 5 per cent. Even the United Kingdom has only 9 per cent.

The only country in the western industrial world that may have more child poverty is the United States. It is not just a matter of poverty, but it is how poverty correlates with other circumstances that put children at a disadvantage. The birth weight of babies born to families who are living in poverty is low. According to the Quebec Corporation of Physicians babies born in certain Montreal and Quebec City neighbourhoods are as likely to be underweight at birth as those in developing countries.

What an indictment of Canada when we have neighbourhoods that are poor and the standard of health of babies born in those neighbourhoods is no better than that of babies born in developing countries.

We know that the mortality rate of children born with low birth weight is twice that of other children. We know that there is a growing problem of hunger among

children in this country. I was involved with the Vancouver school board in its attempts to get both the provincial government and this federal government to assist it in developing programs to feed school children who had come to school without having had breakfast, who had not had supper the day before, and probably some of them had not eaten for one or two days. Unfortunately they got no help from either the provincial government or the federal government.

Income assistance rates, according to studies in British Columbia, provide only enough money to feed children for two and a half weeks out of the month. What do you say to a hungry child? It is all very nice to pretend that you are going to be able to educate that child. The government talked this week about reducing the drop-out rate among school children, and the best way to do that is to ensure that every child belongs to a family that has an adequate level of income. The drop-out rate is well over twice, in fact nearly three times the rate for children from poor families compared with rich families.

Sometimes we think it is mystical but what about a 13 year old who is going to school and trying to compete with other kids, where they have money to go on field trips, money for new running shoes, money to buy school lunches and they have nothing? They soon get discouraged and simply withdraw from that situation where they are perpetually embarrassed because they cannot participate in the life of the school the way their peers can.

Among the other factors that are creating poverty in this country for children is the housing crisis. Increasingly, families are being driven into poverty, particularly in the metropolitan areas like Vancouver and Toronto, because once they pay for their housing they have no disposable income left over to feed the children.

I notice, Mr. Speaker, you are signalling that I have run out of time. I will close with this one remark. Canada is a wealthy country. There is no excuse for child poverty in Canada. Eradicating poverty is one of the best ways we can ensure the protection of children in this country.

Mr. Howard Crosby (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Treasury Board): Mr. Speaker, let me begin by extending my thanks and encouragement to the