

Canada Pension Plan

this plan as the religious groups which are now exempted from it.

● (1510)

I should like also to point out the basic premise on which I will be basing my support of the amendments to the act contained in Bill C-190. I believe that the Canadian Bill of Rights passed in 1960, as well as the Alberta bill of rights, takes precedence in respect of this whole area of freedom of religion. This means that this basic freedom must be honoured and take precedence above the principle of universality which the Canada Pension Plan purports to adopt.

What is the case? Why, for instance, do the Hutterian Brethren object to the Canada Pension Plan and to pension plans in general? They object because a person belonging to that group took the vows of perpetual poverty. He cannot hold any possession, privately or individually. So based on their religious vows, they believe that by building up a pension they are building up personal equity. Whether the pension plan is administered by the government or by an independent insurance company, the person who takes out the pension plan is building up an equity for the time when he is old or disabled. This is entirely contrary to the religious beliefs of the Hutterian Brethren and contrary to their vows of perpetual poverty. So, it is not a matter of escaping taxes or escaping a responsibility but rather a violation of the basic right enshrined in the Canadian Bill of Rights, that is freedom of religion.

I think further that very clearly when the Anabaptist groups came to Canada the letters patent of 1873 were not enshrined in the law, but the government of the day let it be understood that those rights and exemptions for which they asked would be maintained in perpetuity. This has been done, and from that point of view the amendments to the Canada Pension Plan in Bill C-190 are valid and do not violate the principles which underlie the bill.

Further, the present government, I believe, has an obligation which goes back to the former minister of national revenue who stated in a letter to the Hutterian Brethren of Canada that as of January 1, 1972 the Hutterian Brethren of Canada would be exempted from paying the Canada Pension Plan premiums. That is the basis of the amendments now before us. There is still the question, whether or not the amendments to the bill carry, of what position should be taken in respect of the premiums that have not been paid from 1966 to 1972. In some provinces they have been paid under protest by the Hutterian Brethren, but in other provinces, specifically in Manitoba, they have not been. Those premiums, in part, have been paid in that the government withheld moneys which were claimed by the Hutterian Brethren of Manitoba from Department of National Revenue at the end of the tax year.

Since 1972, when they received a letter from the then minister of national revenue, the department has again withheld moneys, either coming through subsidies under the agricultural programs of the Department of Agriculture or from the Department of National Revenue in rebates for income tax payments. Despite the assurances which they received from the minister effective from

[Mr. Epp.]

January 1, 1972 the policy has not yet been altered so far as the actual collection of those premiums is concerned.

I do not believe that you can approach this case from the point of view of universality or from the point of view of security, because both those premises of those who oppose the amendments to the Canada Pension Plan are not valid. In so far as Universality is concerned the Hutterian Brethren have been exempted from the provisions of the Canada Pension Plan, and they do not demand from the state security payments or welfare payments which the rest of society receive from the government at the age of 65 or whatever the case may be.

In defence of the case that all goods are held in common I refer you to a case in Manitoba. Without a doubt most members of the House know that all children born to Hutterians do not remain in the colony, and there is a period of time when a certain number of them will leave the colony. They might come back or they might not. In Manitoba, a case came before the courts in which a certain number of Hutterian Brethren had left the colony in which they lived and then asked a court to rule that they could receive that proportion of the assessed goods of the colony to which their number was equivalent. In the judgment in Manitoba, the court very clearly decided that because of the vows of perpetual poverty and communal holdings, a Hutterian did not own anything; the goods were held in common and could not be divided as members left. So, the members did not have a specific proportion or ratio of the total goods of that community. If the decision had been the other way, it would have destroyed the very tenets on which the religion of these people is based.

Canada is a democracy and it is made up of various people. We come here with various backgrounds. I also subscribe to the idea that every citizen should accept responsibility to the nation. On the other hand, the strength of a democracy lies in the freedoms to which we give lip service. If these freedoms exist and are allowed in practice, then I believe that the amendments in Bill C-190 strengthen the democracy and give credence to the principles on which that democracy is based.

Bill C-190 still does not clear up the question of the backlog nor what will be done about those premiums from 1966 to 1972. I believe that the government, in bringing forth these amendments, is fulfilling an obligation which it has toward these people. I do not believe the bill is in direct conflict with the basic principle of universality, and I am happy to state clearly that I will support these amendments when they come up for a final vote.

Mr. Horner (Crowfoot): Would the hon. member permit a question? I should like to direct the following question to him. Would he be prepared to support an amendment to the bill which would allow any religious organization, whether or not it was founded before 1966, to have the same opportunity to opt out of the Canada Pension Plan payments?

Mr. Epp: I believe that the hon. member for Crowfoot (Mr. Horner) and I could come to a common understanding.