

Oral Questions

"In bad times as well as in good times", the principle of first call.

I want to ask the Prime Minister why he is being so inconsistent. If he is so committed to the over one million poor children in Canada, why is his government so consistently attacking the social programs upon which they rely for their very survival?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada spends, I think, in excess of \$15 billion a year at the moment in looking after children in various ways.

Reforms to the tax system that we have brought about have favoured the working poor. My hon. friend is shaking his head. The fact of the matter is that all of the tax changes have been designed to help working families and the working poor. I think that is pretty obvious and is recognized by experts. There is nothing inconsistent at all with anything that is taking place except this. My hon. friend says food banks. No, that is wrong.

The minister of health just said it properly, when one child in a country like Canada is in poverty, that is one child too many. What we are working toward by trying to restructure the economy to build new wealth is to have more genuine resources so that we can distribute them to people in need, beginning with children. The declaration this afternoon is pursuant to an international convention on behalf of children, which benefits children. I will be damned if I can figure out why the NDP and the Liberals are making partisan shots at something so important as the welfare of children.

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CHILD POVERTY

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, one of the reasons why Liberals are raising this question is because UNICEF itself has said that Canada's proportion of children living below the poverty line has increased over the past couple of years. That is from the United Nations itself.

That's false? If the Prime Minister is still learning how to read, he should start reading that report.

Mr. Speaker: Just a moment. The Chair has been fairly patient on this subject. I would like the attention of the House, please. The Chair has been fairly patient on this exchange. However, I am now asking members to put

questions and I am asking ministers to do the very best they can to answer. I do not think we are advancing the cause everybody seems to be so excited about by some of the conduct in the Chamber.

Mr. Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, when the Prime Minister signed the declaration last year, every world government committed to putting forward a clear plan of action by the end of 1991. We do not yet have a plan of action.

I want to ask the Prime Minister this. In the next 24 hours, before this House closes, will the government table its plan of action to deal with the problem of children?

Hon. Benoît Bouchard (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, the plan of action will be tabled in the House around February or March.

The reason is very simple. We live in a federation where we are trying to be in line with all the provinces. In the case of children, I think the positions of the provinces have to be put all together, which has not been easy even for the convention because the convictions are not the same all across the country.

I can assure the member that within the next two or three months we will put in front of the House of Commons a plan of action dealing with children and I believe we will do what is necessary to help all children of Canada.

Hon. Lloyd Axworthy (Winnipeg South Centre): Mr. Speaker, on my supplementary let me go back to the Prime Minister.

When he signed that declaration Canada committed additional resources, close to \$350 million, to a world action plan. In the meantime we have cut back our ODA budgets.

I ask the Prime Minister this: Would he endorse the idea of using those funds withheld from countries with unacceptable human rights records, such as the \$30 million we withheld from Indonesia, and direct that money to programs to address children's poverty around the world?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, we are going to make and will continue to make very substantial contributions to children both in Canada and around the world.