

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, May 10, 1984

The House met at 11 a.m.

• (1105)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

ALLOTTED DAY, S.O. 62—RETIREMENT INCOME

Hon. Flora MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands) moved:

That this House profoundly regrets the two-year delay of the Government in bringing in promised legislation to improve guaranteed income supplements for low-income single elderly Canadians, and condemns the Government for its failure to respond to the innovative proposals of the all-party Parliamentary Task Force on Pension Reform to expand opportunities for Canadians under age 65 to make adequate provision for income in their retirement years.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased that the Opposition is able to raise this question of pension reform once again for debate in this House of Commons. We do so in the hope and expectation that somehow it will move the Government forward, if only slightly, to the very real changes which are needed in the pension system in Canada; to make sure that those who are now in greatest need will have their wants addressed; and that there will be changes so that the poverty we see now all too often among our elderly citizens is not perpetuated into the future.

Back in March of 1983, Mr. Speaker, at a meeting of the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs, I posed a question to the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Miss Bégin) concerning the tragic plight in which so many of our elderly citizens find themselves as a result of inadequate income. I asked her when there might be an increase in the guaranteed income supplement so as to relieve their poverty. The Minister responded in this way. Mind you, this was back in March of 1983. She said that "the cost of bringing the single pensioners over the poverty line... has been approved by the Government as their first social spending—whenever we can afford it".

• (1110)

When I posed that question one year ago, Mr. Speaker, it was not the first time it was asked. It was not the last time that it was posed to the Minister, to the Minister of Finance (Mr. Lalonde) and to the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau). Each time they were asked about Canada's elderly poor, the Ministers replied that the needs of this group were their top priority and

that legislation to improve their lot would be the first piece of social legislation which would be brought before the House.

Since then the Minister of National Health and Welfare has seen fit to bring in the Canada Health Act. The Government has introduced measures to put restrictions on transfers for post-secondary education. There have been these Bills and others dealing with social issues, but there is still no sign of legislation to address the pressing needs of Canada's 600,000 elderly poor, the group which the Government has said time and again is their top priority.

The fact that we have 600,000 elderly Canadians living in poverty in a country as rich and bountiful as Canada, in a society supposedly as compassionate and humane as ours, is a national disgrace. The fact that this has been allowed to continue month after month, year after year, is a telling indictment of the Government. The Government is bereft of ideas, drained of decency, and unable to recognize the priorities which must be dealt with in this society. I know the Government has its priorities: bail-outs of de Havilland, Canadair and Maislin; bonuses for executive officers in de Havilland and the Canada Development Investment Corporation; and the purchase of Petrofina gas stations. We know what the priorities of the Government are. For the people who have, throughout their lifetimes, worked for and contributed to the development of this great country, there is only a promise trotted out time and time again that some day, some time, they too will become a priority.

Is it any wonder, Sir, that today we condemn the Government? We condemn it not only for its failure to introduce legislation that would meet the current needs of today's elderly poor, but also for its failure to bring about long overdue pension reform of the whole system so that we can ensure that the poverty of today will not be meted out to those who will be senior citizens in 10, 20 or 30 years' time. We must begin to come to grips with this issue and reverse what is happening.

Studies, conferences and task forces on pension reform have been going on for years, Mr. Speaker. It would take the rest of my allotted time today to even name all of the conferences and commissions which have taken place, let alone comment on the recommendations which they have put forward. It was the concern about the difficulties encountered by many of today's elderly, and the prospect of even greater numbers being in straitened circumstances in the not too distant future unless corrective measures are taken quickly, that precipitated most of the studies which have taken place. It was the same concern which precipitated the establishment of the all-Party parliamentary task force on pension reform. I want to pay credit to the work of that task force because it worked long and hard