

Private Members' Business

The member is dreaming in technicolour if he thinks that if our expense allowance was to be made taxable and we then found it to be inadequate that we could just simply stroll back in here and increase it so that we would be getting exactly the same amount without bringing down upon ourselves much more criticism than the criticism he feels he is responding to now, I think he is being quite unrealistic.

Therefore, I go back to my original point, that no matter how we deal with it, what we need to do is somehow get it out of our hands. That point was made by my leader the other day with respect to the whole issue of MPs pensions, which has become such an issue, that is to get it out of our hands, to have somebody else make that judgment and probably to go beyond what we have done over the years, which is by law to have two retired MPs look at it. People could still say: "Well it is still part of the club". Let us have a mixture of people look at it and come in with some recommendations. I venture to suggest that if we did our jobs here, the responsibilities that we have might be judged by these outsiders to be worthy of more compensation than we receive now. I do not know.

The problem is that it might be the case in spite of everything everybody believes, that the greatest restraint on MPs salaries and other things is to some degree the fact that we do have to set them ourselves and we are politically answerable for that. Maybe there have been times when that has not been the case. I am certainly open to that, having voted against an increase myself in 1981, the last time there was an increase.

But it may be the case that the very fact we are in control of it actually acts as a restraint. It may be hard to believe, given everything people say these days about our benefits, et cetera. In spite of the fact that it might be true, I say for the sake of the political process and for the sake of members of Parliament, we do have to get it out of our hands.

It will not be just us who will have to take our chances with whatever those people will recommend, the public will have to take its chances with what an independent review of our situation might recommend. We will all have to take our chances.

The attempt by the member of single out this one element however much I might agree with the tax principle involved—

Mr. Mills: Well, that is what it is, a tax principle.

Mr. Blaikie: The tax principle involved is misguided at this point to the extent that it does not deal with the entire package it would have to deal with in order to be adequate.

Mr. Ross Belsher (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Ontario for bringing this subject to our attention this evening.

I for one can say one's standard of living does not go up when one becomes a member of Parliament. Nonetheless, it still does not alter the fact that the vast majority of people think that members of Parliament are very highly paid people. True, our salaries are certainly well above the average of what a lot of Canadians are earning. We are allowed an expense allowance, tax free money that is given to us to cover the extra expenses we have in accepting this challenge that has been given to us.

I think the hon. member from New Brunswick has hit the nail on the head when he said: "Listen, let us not look at this in isolation. Let us look at the total package and see if we can improve on what has been done".

I know in many other jurisdictions, at the lower levels in public life, the tax free money is usually one-third of the total compensation. That is not the case for members of Parliament. It has been kept to a set amount. I also know the way of life members of Parliament are obliged to live and what people expect of them when they send them invitations to various fundraising activities in the ridings and when people come to Ottawa and look forward to being entertained upstairs in the restaurant. These are things people just assume we can put on an expense account and get reimbursed for.

No, it comes out of the allowance which has been given to us, along with our second residence. In the last two years, we have been able to claim up to \$6,000 of allowance for living away from our principal residence.