

The Budget—Miss Bégin

cuts in our social programs; and cuts in our social programs will very soon be reflected in a diminution of the quality of life which Canadians have the right to expect. I am delighted to note that the vast majority of Canadians do not agree with the Tory opposition on that proposition. A Gallup poll survey carried out for the Anti-Inflation Board and reported two weeks ago had determined that only 7 per cent of the people blamed the government's social programs for inflation whereas 63 per cent blamed business or labour. Canadians believe in their social programs for the simple reason that they work. They have worked well enough to improve very substantially the quality of life in Canada over the last decade and they can be made to improve it still more in the years ahead. But they will do so only if we retain the steadfastness and good sense to maintain our balance in face of the shrill cries of a tiny minority who would diminish the quality of life of the majority simply because we live in times of economic uncertainty.

Perhaps I could best illustrate what I mean by referring to levels of poverty in Canada. I will certainly not stand here today and claim we have solved the problem of poverty. We must do much more to improve the share of the national income going to our poorer people.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Hear, hear!

Miss Bégin: I am pleased the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) is here.

An hon. Member: He is always here.

Miss Bégin: I would also claim that the effect of our social programs on income distribution has been far better than has been generally acknowledged. As the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) has pointed out in this chamber, progress against poverty, with poverty defined in terms of having an income below some barely minimum acceptable floor, has actually been quite dramatic over the last decade. According to the measure used by the Economic Council of Canada, only about 10 per cent of Canadians are poor today compared to about 20 per cent in 1967. One could dispute the measure used by the Economic Council and turn to the Senate report on poverty or some other measure, but the fact remains that the percentage of people living in absolute poverty in Canada has diminished tremendously, almost by 50 per cent, in the last ten years.

What I was discussing when I spoke elsewhere of relative poverty was another concept. I spoke of the share of money income going to the poor compared to the share going to other groups in society. I said the proportion had not changed appreciably. If one uses that measure, it can be said we have simply kept pace. The poorest 20 per cent of Canadian families and individuals currently receive about 6 per cent of our money income, while the proportion of revenue to which they have access—this should be noted; it was not mentioned by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre when he questioned the Prime Minister—would, in the absence of government transfer, have been only about 1.6 per cent.

[Miss Bégin.]

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): It is still far too low.

Miss Bégin: It is always too low. We are pleased to see we can count on the support, as so often in the past, of the New Democratic Party as expressed by its official critic in this field.

Earlier today, the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) said that when the government took office ten years ago the total budget amounted to the extent of the present total anticipated deficit. In passing, may I mention that he was supposed to have talked about social policy but we did not hear a word about social policy during his speech. Let me remind him and his hon. friends of the situation surrounding government spending ten years ago by comparison with what Canadians receive, what they have at night when they go to sleep. They often fear, eventually, insecurity as a result of being handicapped or suffering the effects of an accident, disease, sickness, a catastrophe in their family life, or any other uncertainty, including unemployment and even, in a sense, maternity—any risk to their jobs. Let us compare the situation ten years ago with the situation now and figure out why there is a deficit, one which, as I suggested in the other official language, is not frightening to Canadians because they realize that their government must bring in an expansionist budget to deal with a difficult economic situation.

In January, 1967, old age security benefit amounted to \$75 a month, and that was all that was provided. Today the old age security payments are \$153.44 a month and guaranteed income supplement of \$107.62 is also available to those who need it.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): You are a month behind. It is \$156.66 now.

An hon. Member: But what are those dollars worth?

Miss Bégin: Of course, payments are indexed to the cost of living; an adjustment is made every three months and these amounts have been higher since April 1. There is also a spouse's allowance of up to \$249 a month for couples where one partner is over 65 and the other between 60 and 65. In 1967, family allowances were \$6 per month for children up to nine years of age. Now they are \$25.68 on average, at \$308 a year as against \$72 ten years ago. Unemployment insurance payments were \$25.96 per week in 1967. We have been fighting to improve payments in the face of criticism from many people who have never been unemployed, but they currently amount to \$160 a week. I am talking, of course, of the ceilings.

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I do not think that is too much when we consider the number of people who support dependants. All these programs have contributed at least to ensuring that the income of Canada's poor did not fall any further behind that of affluent Canadians in recent years.