

Family Allowances Act

Mr. Riis: I am saying that some Members opposite were laughing when I said that when mothers heard that their family allowance payments were going to be decreased tears came into their eyes. I do not find anything funny about that. I realize that not everyone was laughing; I am simply saying that some Members opposite found that to be humorous.

Mr. Manly: They should be standing up defending those people.

Mr. Riis: I know that for many people the family allowance cheque which comes each month does not make a big difference in terms of purchasing power. However, when one considers that there are something in the neighbourhood of 1.5 million Canadians who are children of low income families, believe me, when that monthly family allowance cheque comes it is important. To some families it means the difference between having winter clothing for the children to wear to school and not having those clothes. To other families it means being able to afford a pair of running shoes in order that those young children can participate in school sports. In some cases, it means whether or not there will be food on the table for those young people to eat.

In the City of Kamloops, and in many other cities across the country, food banks are very busy at a certain time of year and at a certain time of month. I am speaking of the time when funds from welfare cheques have run out and when people are waiting for family allowance cheques to come in. I am speaking of the time when mothers have to go to the food banks to obtain food in order to put it on the table for their children. That has become a reality now for an increasing number of families in the country.

As responsible parliamentarians, we cannot overlook that. We cannot pretend that it is not taking place. That is why we as New Democrats feel this legislation must be hoisted—it must be stopped. That is why we speak in favour of this motion to hoist this Bill for at least six months. Quite frankly, it should be hoisted for an eternity. It should be an infinite hoist, not one for just six months. I am certain that six months from now it will not make any more sense than it does today. However, it is a way of deferring the decision until, hopefully, saner heads prevail.

It was an extremely stressful situation for me to go door to door and speak to these individuals who will be receiving diminished family allowance payments. It was not easy to ask them what it would mean to their lives; nor was it easy to find out that a decreased family allowance payment over the next number of months will have a profound influence on many of the families whom I visited. It was but a handful, Mr. Speaker. However, I remember vividly a few months ago when the present Minister of Justice (Mr. Crosbie) had this to say: "Mr. Speaker, you have to be tough, mean and nasty and do all kinds of unpleasant things." The context of the preceding quote was in the sense that we cannot tell the people of Canada what we will do when we get into power because if we tell them then they will never elect us. That was a statement by the present Minister of Justice before the last election. I

remember his words. I remember referring to them on a number of occasions and recognizing that there is an honest man who spoke the absolute truth. I realized that if the Progressive Conservatives had actually laid out what they were going to do before the last election, it would be quite a different result today. However, that is past history. I just wish to point out that, in a sense, we were forewarned when senior spokespersons for that Party indicated that the Government has to be mean and nasty. I suppose a great many of us did not think that the Government would have to be mean and nasty to Canada's children and to mothers struggling to raise those children. We really did not think that is what the Minister of Justice was referring to when he made that comment.

Today, in Canada, one out of every five children under the age of 16 lives in poverty. I hope Members opposite will reflect carefully when they vote on the motion before us. I hope Members opposite will reflect on what this legislation will mean to those young people who are living in poverty. I hope they will reflect on what this move will mean to families who really look forward to the family allowance cheque to make up the difference.

I realize there have been changes with respect to tax credits and to the Income Tax Act which will help some families. Let us also recognize that that happens once a year, at tax return time. The people I am referring to are people who are literally struggling on a day-to-day, week-to-week and month-to-month basis. The fact that they will receive some relief at the tax year-end is encouraging. However, it is a year late. What will those families do for the other 12 months of the year?

I ask Members opposite to think seriously about what this measure will do to so many people in their own constituencies. This is not unique to any region of Canada. It is not isolated to any one constituency or province. When one considers that the legislation which is before us is being placed on top of legislation which was introduced with the Budget to cut back on housing for low income Canadians, legislation which removed the possibility for so many Canadians under the Registered Home Ownership Savings Plan to afford decent housing, and when one considers the cut-backs on planned parenthood and on transfer payments, and when we see the Government increasing the cost of living for people as a result of the federal sales tax, we see this measure as simply one more burden. We do not have to go through with it. When one considers the total federal Budget, the amounts of money we are considering here are infinitesimal. I plead with Hon. Members, particularly those who sit on the government benches, that, when the time comes to vote on the motion, they realize the importance of doing whatever we can as responsible parliamentarians to ensure that those people who need help today receive it. What that means is that this legislation must not be allowed to proceed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Hon. Member for York East (Mr. Redway) on a question or comment.

Mr. Redway: Mr. Speaker, I was pleased to hear the Hon. Member finally recognize toward the end of his remarks the