

Retirement Age

imply. Two studies referred to by the United States Senate Committee on Human Resources made this point: a New York survey compared workers over and under the age of 65 with regard to absenteeism, punctuality, on-the-job accidents, and over-all job performance. It concluded that older workers were about equal to, and sometimes noticeably better than, younger workers.

• (1730)

The University of Illinois came to a similar conclusion in its study, which reported that there was no specific age at which employees became unproductive. Also this report expressed the view that satisfactory work performance may continue even into the eighth decade. The director of a creativity program in the United States found that fully 80 per cent of the most workable and worthwhile new ideas were produced by employees who were over 60. Younger employees had a tendency, as he put it, to "re-invent the wheel".

There is no question that these studies should cause us to pause and re-examine the discriminatory practices prevalent in the whole area of mandatory retirement. We must begin to judge people on the basis of competence and not judge them just on the basis of age.

If we continue to subscribe to the policy of retirement at age 65, we will find that an increasingly larger share of our population will be considered, and will consider themselves, as second class citizens; the unproductive old. It seems to me our present focus on age 65 as the age of retirement is based more and more on tradition rather than on any rational motives.

Let me briefly examine the history of the 65 retirement age policy. The modern history of mandatory retirement and the use of the figure 65 as the magic number are both traced back to Germany's famous Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck. Hoping to stave off socialism in his country, the Chancellor initiated the social security pension system in 1889 at which time he proclaimed 65 as the appropriate age for retirement.

Bismarck's model has been followed ever since in much of the western world. Over the years it has become ingrained in our society to the point where age 65 is considered the line of demarcation between middle age and old age. Ironically, Bismarck himself was 74 years of age when he introduced his pension scheme and was at the height of his spectacular career as the "Iron Chancellor". Perhaps Bismarck's choice of 65 was quite appropriate for his time and may even have been stretching things a bit, because in Bismarck's day only a small percentage of the population lived to be 65. Life expectancy at that time was 37. Our average life expectancy today is over 74, and many more of us make it to the age of 65 in a state of better physical and sounder mental health than they did in Bismarck's time. Therefore, we must ask ourselves whether it still makes sense in this day and age to retire a person automatically at 65. Is it fair to do so?

For those Hon. Members who still have doubts, I would recommend that they recall that several of our colleagues in the House are well past the traditional retirement age. Personally, I am grateful for the expertise which they continue to offer in our day-to-day proceedings. However, in this House

we are fortunate in that we do not have to face the threat of forced retirement simply because we have reached some arbitrary age limit. It is only right and proper that this privilege be extended to the rest of Canadian society. Ability and not age should be the determining factor in deciding whether a person should look forward to their retirement at 65, or even earlier, but the important point is that there should be a freedom of choice.

Now let us assess some of the supposed benefits of the current retirement policy. One of the arguments for mandatory retirement is that the 65 retirement age policy frees up scarce positions for unemployed youth. However, it has been found in studies done in the United States that the number of jobs freed by mandatory retirement appears small compared to the physical, psychological and social benefits gained by permitting the older worker, who is willing and able, to remain in the work force. Also there is the argument that after 30 odd years of productive labour, society owes its older workers a number of years of blissful retirement. This may be so, Mr. Speaker, but we do have a responsibility as well to those who have no desire to stop work and to the many who are able to work, who need to work, and who want to work.

In our society where so much emphasis is placed on the work ethic, work gives form, dimension and meaning to the life of the average citizen. The American Medical Association has indicated that there was considerable medical evidence that the sudden cessation of productive work and earning power of an individual, caused by compulsory retirement at the chronological age of 65, often leads to physical and emotional deterioration and premature death. It was indicated further that few physicians deny that a direct relationship exists between forced idleness and poor health, and that chronic complaints develop more frequently when a person is inactive and without basic interests. These disturbing statements alone should compel us to re-think the whole issue of mandatory retirement.

Of course, there are familiar arguments in favour of retaining a compulsory retirement policy in industry and Government. One is the contention by large companies that retirement pension plans would be greatly disrupted by eliminating the retirement at age 65 tradition. This suggests to me, Mr. Speaker, that actuarial computations are somehow more important than the fulfilment of human lives. I totally reject such a proposition. Such a contention also overlooks the fact that where optional retirement is available and pension plans are adequate, many workers elect to retire before they reach 65. But to postulate from this that all should leave productive employment at a given age is illogical, wasteful and immoral. If, as some authorities maintain, we are resigned to a shrinking national economy, then the economy itself must be economical, particularly of talent and experience.

Those are the few remarks I wanted to make, Mr. Speaker. I certainly welcome input from other Hon. Members. Hopefully, my Bill will come to a vote.

Mr. Maurice Foster (Algoma): Mr. Speaker, I am glad to have a chance to say a few words this afternoon on Bill C-425,