

Social Policy

● (1612)

[English]

Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I enjoy the friendly teasing I get sometimes around here, Mr. Speaker, about having been here for quite a while, but this is the first time it has been suggested to me that I should have come even before I did!

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I could have come here a few years earlier, but back in those days you had to be 21 even to run for this place.

I rise to support the motion presented by the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands (Miss MacDonald). This will make it necessary for me to answer some of the statements that have been made by the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Miss Bégin), but I hope to relate my remarks directly to the motion and to the import of the motion as I see it.

The motion speaks of severe inequities in the government's arrangements for elderly Canadians, and then cites a particular case having to do with an inequity suffered by women. The facets of the subject of retirement income or the arrangements we make for our older people are many, and the two speeches made thus far demonstrate that point. But I should like, in the time that I have this afternoon, to concentrate on a gross unfairness which, it seems to me, exists and which we should correct, and that is the unfairness of our pension arrangements to women in our society.

I listened with interest when the Minister of National Health and Welfare gave us her priorities in social policy, and I find there is a good deal of merit in the priorities that she outlined. She said that she is, first of all, concerned about those who are in their working years and who do not have enough income to maintain a decent standard of living or to maintain their families. Then she said that the second priority, so far as she is concerned, has to do with older people. Well, I should like to draw to her attention the fact, in terms of older people, that a distinction must be made between the treatment accorded to men and the treatment accorded to women. The fact is that on many counts older women suffer discrimination, and if the minister looks more closely at the suffering of older women, I think she will find that their need has a priority equal to the priority which she gives as number one.

There are several ways, as I said, in which that discrimination stands out, but even before I get to that I might say a word or two on some of the things the minister said. I notice, of course, that she, like many before her on that side, has a great deal of sympathy with the social aims advanced from this side, but there is always the cost problem. I remember reading about it when finance minister Dunning told J. S. Woodsworth that we could not pay a pension of \$20 to Canadians 70 years and over because we could not afford it. That was in the 1920s.

[Miss Bégin.]

When I came here in the early 1940s, Mr. Ilsley was the finance minister. He was also sympathetic to the pleas I was making on behalf of older people, but he told us that the country could not afford the cost.

Down through the years, everything that we have advocated by way of an improvement in social policy has been given that answer—that we cannot afford the cost. Mind you, it is a bit of an experience to sit here today and hear the hon. member for York-Simcoe (Mr. Stevens) trying to point out that things are so much better in the United States than they are here, and then hear the Liberals on the other side boasting about medicare and about our social programs, programs against which they fought for years, indeed for decades. However, the fact is that we have implemented these programs and we are able to afford them and will go on affording them.

In terms of retirement income, I think the statistics I gave in a speech some time ago spell out the point. At the present time, the older people of this country, people 65 years of age and over, constitute about 9 per cent of the population, but the total income of that 9 per cent is about 4 per cent of the wealth being produced by this country today. That total income includes not only their old age security and other government benefits, but any private income some of them may have.

When we talk about the cost of social programs, that is the reality to which we must address ourselves. Can we not as a society so order our affairs, so distribute the wealth that we produce, that we can give a section of our society, which amounts to 9 per cent, something better than the 4 per cent we are giving them now? If we cannot do that, let us not have all this talk about the cost that we cannot afford.

I was also interested in the comment of the Minister of National Health and Welfare to the effect that the government wanted to move in the direction of a guaranteed annual income. At one point she blamed the provinces, but then she blamed the opposition.

Mr. Alexander: I am glad I was not here.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): I did not know that this was a minority parliament. As far I know, the government has sat there with a solid majority since 1974 and has been able to do anything it wanted to do. If it did not have enough support from the Liberals on its own back benches, it has had our support down the line for social programs, as it had during the minority years from 1972 to 1974.

Mr. Alexander: Foot-dragging.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): The minister can, in some circles, get away with complaints about the provinces—and there are too many Conservative governments in the provinces of this country; she knows that and I know it—but she cannot get away with the argument that this government could not do what it wanted to in the parliament of 1974 to 1978, with the huge majority it has had in all that time.

There is one other matter with which I should like to dispense, and it takes only a sentence or two to do it. The