

Old Age Security Act

committee, we reminded him that some people would not be eligible unless his proposal was made retroactive. The minister did not try to hide behind the statement of the Hon. Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson). And he did not pretend either that the government had no money. He said that we were right, that he would try to do something about it. And when he returned, he had won his case. But he was a minister as dedicated as Mrs. Bégin. I do not think anybody in Canada could question the honesty and the work done by Mrs. Bégin.

But the then Minister of National Health, who is now Minister of Indian Affairs, had taken seriously his role as spokesman and advocate of the rights and needs of middle and low-income citizens. Without exception, he would side with senior citizens, with families and children, and he would defend the health system. But, unfortunately, the present Minister of Health, unlike all his predecessors, is only a spokesman for the Minister of Finance. That is not his job. The Minister of Finance and the executioner at Treasury Board can manage by themselves. Within the Cabinet, we need someone who is concerned, someone with guts. If the Minister of Health cannot play that role, he should change jobs with the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, because his colleague could do the job. I think he will make his mark.

I see the Parliamentary Secretary. I trust her. I think she is a kind person, who knows life, who has political experience, who knows her riding and I am confident, I am convinced, that she will try to do her best to persuade the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) or the Minister of Finance (Mr. Wilson) to come up with a solution, not givaways but an honourable solution. As I said, it should be remembered that in each of our ridings, when the legislation . . . After all, there is no urgency, we do not have to pass this legislation tomorrow because, anyway, it will not become effective until the 1st of September. So, why pass it right away? People will not have more money. It is only on the 1st of September that they will get anything. Is it to silence people that we are trying to pass this bill so quickly? We Liberals say no. We will not let the bill pass unheeded.

I think it is important that each and every Hon. Member think it over. Over the holidays and weekends, we will return to our ridings; perhaps it would be important to raise the issue with our constituents. Let us forget the financing factor. I am sure that if we look carefully into the expenditures of all departments, we can find the money to behave in a humane manner.

Remember that if we allow this bill to pass without change, an elderly women may visit your riding office and say: "I am 62. Being on social welfare, I do not live below the poverty line, but under the distress line. I have raised a number of children and I meet all the requirements. Yet, when I went to the Old Age Security office, my application was turned down." You will ask: "How is it possible?". And she will say: "Well, you see, I separated from my husband a number of years ago".

She will feel that the House is penalizing her once again. Perhaps she will feel guilty for not putting up with her husband who was beating her. We are trying to assess what it is worth in dollars and cents. Is a widow more deserving than a single or separated woman? I think there are Hon. Members representing rural ridings . . . How many people here have had to support dependent children—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Charest): I regret to interrupt the Hon. Member, but the 20-minute period is now over. Questions or comments! The Hon. Member for Lotbinière (Mr. Tremblay) has the floor.

Mr. Tremblay (Lotbinière): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the last words of the Hon. Member for Montreal-Sainte-Marie (Mr. Malépart) who was referring to a potential cause for divorce. I would like him to tell us whether it is widespread, whether most divorces and separations come about as a result of the kind of situation he referred to. I would also like him to explain why during his last term, from 1980 to 1984, when he was in power . . . the Government did not improve the situation of the widow who received a spouse allowance provided her husband had previously received the Old Age Security Pension. That being, according to his definitions, discriminatory, why did the Government not then extend the application of this provision in order to do what he is suggesting today?

● (1750)

Mr. Malépart: Mr. Speaker, he is asking me: How many persons? I am not the one . . . I am not an expert nor a lawyer, but I have the figures from the Department. There are 80,000 separated and divorced people in Canada, 30,000 in Quebec. So, I do not need to know whether the woman who is separated deserves more than the single one. I think it is inhuman, and I am even humiliated to be forced to debate the question in these terms. I think it would be preferable to say that we will help the persons who are on their own. They have the priority, although there are couples as well who are not a lot richer, but I understand that the government cannot find \$1500 million. I think that we have to be realistic and say that this applies to all persons on their own, whatever their status. Is there going to be a police investigation? What you don't know is that a divorced person will not be eligible, but a separated person will become eligible when the spouse dies. Have you thought about all the problems caused by this? Have you thought about how it will be applied? Have you considered the human dimension?

The second question was: Why was it not done before? I will state again for the Hon. Member the reasons I have given earlier: In 1984, we fought to have the Minister of Finance grant funds to increase the guaranteed income supplement for people 65 and over living alone, because it was under the poverty line by \$70. Unlike the Hon. Member who looks like a true Progressive Conservative, we were not in favour of keeping people poor and of taking the money to make