

Old Age Security Act

government, and vice versa, where it is necessary to handle the situation in these areas.

I have now said the things I wanted to say about this measure. There should be no doubt now about the views of those of us who have spoken from this group. We are going to support this legislation, not because it provides all we want for the elderly people of this country but because it is a little better than we could get from the bargain basement Conservatives. This Liberal group happens to be in power for the moment and this is all we can get now. I want to say that we will support this measure, but as soon as it is passed we will start on our next campaign for more.

Mr. Maurice Foster (Algoma): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to join in the debate on Bill C-147, to amend the Old Age Security Act. In my view, income support for our senior citizens is one of the cornerstones of our social security policy. In correspondence and conversations with my constituents, the importance of ensuring an adequate standard of living for our pensioners is a constantly recurring theme. This widespread concern for the welfare of our old people can be accounted for on several grounds. In part it is a human response to a situation of obvious social and economic disparity. In part it derives from the fact that most of us have intimate associations with elderly people—our parents, grandparents and friends. In part it undoubtedly reflects the realization that all of us will one day be old.

In any event, I subscribe to the theory that the way in which we treat the elderly is an important test of our society's level of civilization. In this respect, I think Canadians can be justifiably proud both in the objectives they have set and in the progress they have made in achieving them. Although as members of this House we may disagree from time to time on specific measures and questions of detail and timing, there is a remarkable degree of consensus among Canadians—one might even say unanimous agreement—as to our society's obligation to ensure a decent standard of living for our senior citizens not as a matter of charity but as a matter of right. We want to ensure that our old people are able to share fully in our nation's ever increasing prosperity, a prosperity which their own past labours have done much to promote and which many of them never knew during their working years when they were struggling to raise young families and meet mortgage payments.

• (1530)

We still have a long way to go before that goal is fully realized, but much progress has been made since January, 1952, when the government of the Right Hon. Louis St. Laurent enacted the Old Age Security Act which for the first time provided universal pension payments to all Canadians aged 70 and over. Developments over the past 21 years, taken together, constitute a revolution in the government's approach to the elderly. The amount of the basic pension has been increased several times since then. The age of eligibility has been lowered to 65 years. The guaranteed income supplement was introduced in 1967. Last year an escalation clause to make payments reflect the full increase in the cost of living was added to both the guaranteed income supplement and the old age pension.

This is a truly remarkable record of achievement for our country. Perhaps I might be permitted to add that it is a truly remarkable record of achievement for Liberal governments.

This progress is reflected in the proportion of our national wealth which we have committed to the task of ensuring a decent standard of living for our elderly people. The amount paid to old age pensioners during 1971-72 was over \$2 billion, of which some \$500 million, or one-fourth, was paid in supplements. Canadians numbering 1,800,000 are now receiving the old age pension. Of this number, 1,050,000 are also receiving the guaranteed income supplement, 500,000 are receiving the full amount, while 550,000 receive a partial amount.

The effect of these increased payments has been to progressively remove our old people from the welfare rolls. We have now reached the point where, according to the latest estimate available, only 5 per cent to 10 per cent of pensioners require welfare assistance, and this is in special circumstances and special cases. We have recognized as a society that old age need not be and must not be allowed to be synonymous with the indignity of abject poverty and deprivation.

This record of achievement of Canada and of its Liberal government is even more impressive when seen in a global context. The variety of different schemes for income support and social assistance makes direct comparison of pension levels between countries quite difficult. However, one central fact is clear: Canada provides a higher guaranteed income, a higher standard of living to its senior citizens than any other country in the world. This is a field in which Canada has led the way. It is an achievement in which we should take pride. At the same time, we must never fall into complacency for much remains yet to be done.

That the present government has not become complacent is evidenced by the bill now before us. This bill would raise the basic monthly pension for an individual from \$82.88 to \$100, an increase of \$17, and for a married couple, from \$165 to \$200, an increase of \$35. This increase—20 per cent on the basic monthly pension—represents the largest single increase in our history. Together with the guaranteed income supplement, it would ensure a minimum monthly income to every Canadian 65 and over of \$170, in the case of an individual, and \$325 in the case of a married couple. Just compare those figures with the \$40 old age pension of only 20 years ago.

In discussing this bill and in assessing the adequacy of the proposed increases in pension payments, it is essential to take into account the combined impact on our senior citizens of certain other measures outlined in the budget speech. The reductions in personal income tax have been designed to give maximum relief to those most in need—low and middle-income Canadians, a category which includes the vast majority of the elderly. Old age pensioners will welcome, as will all other Canadians, the increase in personal exemptions from \$1,500 to \$1,600 in the case of individuals, and from \$2,850 to \$3,000 in the case of married couples. Together with the increase in the special exemption for pensioners—from \$650 to \$1,000, the highest in the world—this will mean that no individual over 65