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| ***Province*** | ***Législature*** | ***Session*** | ***Type de discours*** | ***Date du discours*** | ***Locuteur*** | ***Fonction du locuteur*** | ***Parti politique*** |
| Alberta | 17e  | 4e  | Réplique au discours du trône | 31 janvier et 3 février 1975 | M. Neil S. Crawford | Ministre de la Santé et du Développement social | PC |

*Vendredi, le 31 janvier 1975*

**Mr. Crawford:** Mr. Speaker, I take pleasure in joining the debate on the main motion which now seems like it began some time ago. I want to begin, as some other hon. members did in speaking to the main motion, by making just a few remarks about the fact that the Speech from the Throne on this occasion was read by the Hon. Ralph Steinhauer, the first Canadian of Native descent to read a Speech from the Throne in Canada.

I think the entire House, time and time again, has reflected on how entirely appropriate we feel it is that a person of his racial descent should be reading the Speech from the Throne in a Canadian Legislature. That it has happened in Alberta for the first time is something I would like to express my personal pride and feeling about.

As well, Mr. Speaker, I wanted to comment on the excellent presentations made by the mover and the seconder of the address in reply to the Speech from the Throne. The hon. Member for Edmonton Strathcona and the hon. Member for Athabasca have also made very notable contributions to the debate. The uniqueness of the pronunciation of a number of words in the Cree language by the hon. Member for Edmonton Strathcona has been remarked upon; something that we hope will be inscribed in *Hansard* in the original Cree characters in the final printing of *Hansard*.

As well I wanted to say about the speech made by the mover that I was very taken with the suggestion he made that the crime compensation type of legislation might be slightly expanded to include compensation for people who have suffered injury, suffered damages, perhaps personal injury, but in the case he quoted, damages in the sense of loss of income as a result of undertaking to try to save the life of another person. It seems to me that my colleagues in the government caucus will want to take a look at a suggestion like that.

I also have the understanding, Mr. Speaker, that there is a number of members who are in the Assembly now who, due to their own decisions, will not be returning. They won’t be placing their names before the electorate in their various constituencies. Among honorable gentlemen opposite – if I make a mistake in mentioning someone who is not retiring and I say he is, I ask him to forgive me; I don’t think I’ll do that. If I make a mistake the other way I consider it much less important because I know there are some that have not perhaps come to my attention. The only word I ever have on these things is occasional conversations with hon. members. But I believe the hon. Member for Wetaskiwin-Leduc, the hon. Member for Cardston, the hon. Member for Taber-Warner, the hon. Member for Hanna-Oyen and the hon. Member for Cypress are among those who have said that they would not seek re-election.

I wanted to wish all of them very well in other pursuits and express on behalf of all members in the Assembly sincere appreciation for the services they have performed and the manners in which they have represented their constituents here.

I don’t think it should happen, Mr. Speaker, that a former premier of this province should be retiring by not seeking re-election, and have us fail to note that we understand and appreciate the contribution he has made, not only to this Legislature, but to several preceding Legislatures, if I’m not mistaken, in the case of the hon. Member for Cypress, going back some twenty years. It’s outstanding contribution.

Mr. Speaker, on our side of the House the hon. Member for Calgary McKnight and two members of the Executive Council – the hon. Minister of Mines and Minerals and the hon. Minister of Highways and Transport - have signified a similar intention that they will not seek re-election. I want to say to all of them that the sense of achievement and the enjoyment of working with people, the understanding that we have of the goals and the attempts that each of us make to achieve things on behalf of the province of Alberta, are marked and outstanding characteristics of all three gentlemen. Speaking for the government caucus, we will certainly miss them and of course it will only be in the sense of their not being in the caucus that we will miss them, because they are good friends and we will be seeing them anyway outside the Chamber.

Now, Mr. Speaker, having heard the brave call of the Leader of the Opposition for less taxes and higher pensions, I thought I would try to place in perspective at the outset of my remarks a few of the programs in regard to senior citizens that the government has brought forward in the Speech from the Throne. This is done, as hon. members are aware, not in the context of a late gasp in the life of this government to try to do a lot of catching up in this field. This is one of those which is entirely different from that.

This is field of concern; a field of policies being proposed, a field of legislative intentions being disclosed in the Speech from the Throne which is part of a continuous record of careful attention and much concern for the position of the senior citizens of our province. I can reflect, and hon. members know the facts, back to the fall of 1971 when the government acted - prior even to the first sitting of the 17th Legislature which began in March of 1972 - months prior to that to resolve one of the difficulties that remained to senior citizens at that time in regard to the payment of premiums for medicare and Alberta Blue Cross coverage. That alone was a contribution to the sense of well-being and a relief to those who previously had to find the funds to make those payments in so many cases. That I think is a very very notable contribution to the enjoyment of life by our citizens of 65 and over,

We are looking, by 1981, at a population of about 158,000 people 65 years and over in the province of Alberta. The interesting thing is that the percentage of people who are 65 and over is increasing and we know the reasons. They increase not only in numbers as the population grows, they increase in the percentage of population. The reasons are the balance in age groups in the population that shifts upwards as a result of smaller families today and of course the longer life expectancy that has been a feature of the last few generations, the slow but continual progress that is being made in increasing the life expectancy of people.

I look forward to programs getting better and better, Mr. Speaker. In 1996 I want to join the ranks of Alberta’s senior citizens, and I don’t shrink from that at all. I think anyone contemplating the process of growing a little older can only hope for one thing; you know you don’t really feel regret at growing older when you consider the alternative.

Part of the message I think that we would all like to express to senior citizens of our province at this time, Mr. Speaker, is that we know we understand them when they tell us that we are not to generalize about them. We are not to look at 127,000 people, which is the approximate number in Alberta as of 1975, and presume that because they have attained that age or a greater age they are likely to be so similar that we should treat them in all respects always the same, and have programs that will stereotype and regiment them. That is not the objective of any enlightened program in regard to senior citizens. We know that they have many many different and varying interests in exactly the same way, I could say, as we have here, but also in the same way that they have always had themselves. And there is nothing that should surprise us at all that those inclinations should carry themselves into the later years of life as well.

The message, therefore, Mr. Speaker, is that the greatest thing we can offer by way of a benefit is independence for the senior citizens: the right to make decisions on their own about the way in which they will live and the various options open to them so far as possible as much as any other person would.

As a result of that we’ve treated the question of minimum income as being of principal importance. There is no better claim to independence than a minimum income adequate for a person to make his own decisions about the various day to day things of life. So that is why that is really right at the top of our list of important programs in the senior citizen section of this year’s Speech from the Throne.

But there are ways other than income of adding to the independence of any person. In the sense of senior citizens in particular, one of the other ones that we want to work with more and more, as a new program, is the support of the individual or the senior citizen couple in their own home for as long as possible before age or illness perhaps make it necessary for them to seek other accommodation, such as in a senior citizens lodge. But the sense of independence that remains to a person who is still able to look after himself or herself in his or her own home is a very very important item. That’s why the home support programs are being encouraged through the senior citizen community service programs that we are going to be asking volunteer associations and municipal governments to work with us on. I believe the funding was referred to in the Speech from the Throne. It would be similar to the funding through the municipalities of the preventive social service programs by which the province would pay 80nper cent of deficits of those undertakings. And I stress it, in leaving the reference to that subject for the moment, Mr. Speaker, in the sense that the message again is independence. That’s the score upon which we’ve tried to fashion these proposals.

In nursing homes and lodges of this province, going from memory, we have in the neighborhood of 6,000 people in lodges and 6,000 people – give or take a few hundred in each case – in nursing homes. I’ve already mentioned that we have 127,000 senior citizens. So the statistic is clear that the vast majority still do look after themselves, despite the importance of those other facilities. We will continue to extend those programs too. The vast majority, some 90 per cent, are still largely self-sufficient, and that’s why the programs of home support are so vital.

Mr. Speaker, I had begun by mentioning the $235 a month assured income plan. The payments will vary of course from person to person because once they get above the old age pension payment from the federal government ant the guaranteed income supplement if they’re entitled to it, people may or may not have differing amounts of income of their own. That means that recipients of the assured income plan will receive amounts which are unlike the $10 a month payment brought in last session, in that people will be getting varying amounts to bring them up to $235.

The people who receive the maximum federal supplement under the guaranteed income supplement program will also, therefore, receive the maximum payment provided under the Alberta program. For the single person at the present time under the federal program alone, that figure is $ 204.27, and for couples it would be $ 194.85 for each of two people. Our program of course brings for a couple, each of two people, $235; therefore $470 as an assured income for two people, both of whom are 65 or over.

I’d have to mention I think at this time, Mr. Speaker, that as the federal program changes and is indexed annually, which is their intention – presumably if inflation continues their adjustments will be upwards – those benefits are all passed on to the senior citizen in the province. In other words, our limit of $235 will change at that time. If the federal government increases its allowance by an additional $5 a month, our program would be a minimum income program not of $235, but $240. I think that’s very very important to point out because it wasn’t always the case in this province that those benefits were passed on.

I remember – and it must be a source of embarrassment to some honorable gentlemen opposite who probably were opposed to what was done at the time - the government in this province in 1970 found that when OAS and GIS, the combined federal program, increased, and this was the combined program at the time, by the sum of $2.21 to $111.41, for those senior citizens who were on public assistance - and they are in the vast majority - but for those who were, the government of the day found it necessary to charge them back the $2.21.

I say, Mr. Speaker, when I hear the hon. Leader of the Opposition crying out for an increase over the $235 a month provided under the new plan and know that he was a member of the Executive Council of this province in January 1970 when the decision was taken that $2.21 was too much to pass on to the senior citizens of this province who were receiving it as part of their income and happened to be on social allowance, the I can understand the great silence on the other side of this Assembly at this particular moment.

Mr. Speaker, I know it’s one minute to one and I just want to say prior to adjourning the debate that the figures will show that the figure of $235 a month per person will give Alberta senior citizens – admittedly the variations are not large among three of the provinces in cash incomes – the highest nevertheless of those three pacesetters in the country which are Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario.

Without going into specifics, Mr. Speaker, the additional benefits which are provided almost uniquely in Alberta in the sense of extended health benefits and the like put Alberta way out in front in regard to income support. By averaging them – if I can just give these two figures at the present time – if you want to average in the benefits over and above the assured income plan that the individual in Alberta receives: [for a] single [person] it would come to $270 a month in value because of the other programs provided. For couples the figure would be $534 per month. I wanted to put those very very significant figures on the record today.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask leave to adjourn debate.

[Ajournement]

*Lundi, le 3 février 1975*

**Mr. Crawford:** Mr. Speaker, one of the very important features of the announcements in the Speech from the Throne that had to do with new and increased benefits for senior citizens in the province related to the fact that there have been, over the past few years to my knowledge and I would expect over the past number of years, a number of areas in which the senior citizens themselves have been expressing the opinion that they could be helped in a number of small ways that would be meaningful.

Because of that the government was pleased to bring forward a program which bears directly upon the financial burden that has been imposed on some senior citizens in respect to the use of ambulances. Because of that, for trips within the corporate limits of a city or municipality where the rate of $20 has applied before under Blue Cross, the new rate will be $25. Perhaps more important is that [with] the previous rates, if the patient had to use the ambulance more than two or three times in a year, which is far more likely in the case of elderly people with more complex health problems than the younger part of the population, then the limit under Blue Cross would perhaps be quickly used up. So in doubling that limit from $100 to $200, Mr. Speaker, this is meant again to be a significant assistance to the senior citizens.

Now, I think all hon. members from time to time would have received representations on the question of the cost of medical examinations for drivers 70 years of age and over. That was another one of the annoying and, in the view of the senior citizens, potentially discriminatory types of anomalies in our legislation that was down away with, or will be done away with as a result of policies flowing from the principles announced in the Speech from the Throne.

 Continuing on the subject of senior citizen health care, Mr. Speaker, Alberta is the only province in Canada which provides coverage for eyeglasses and dental care as a part of a special senior citizen program. One other province helps with hearing aids but not to the extent that is done in Alberta.

The prescription drug plan, of course, covers 80 per cent of costs, and recent changes in the manner of handling that plan have made it much more convenient for people who use it and certainly for the senior citizens.

I think also, Mr. Speaker, that the extended health benefits plan itself stands as being unique in the country. So often in previous years senior citizens went without adequate eyeglasses or hearing aids for lack of financial resources. We know that difficulties with hearing and eyesight can be some of the things that attend upon any person’s advancing years. When you consider it from the point of view that these things were beyond the reach of a lot of our senior citizens because of a lack of financial resources, the extended health benefits plan is brought particularly sharply into focus. Inadequate hearing or eyesight can have a bearing on the ability to relate socially to people and can affect mental health. As well, there is no question that poor teeth can affect nutrition.

So this part of the health care program, which I’ve said is unique in our province, is another one of those ways in which, as I tried to stress the other day, the government is doing its best to contribute to the independence, in their lives still, of citizens of Alberta despite advancing years.

I think it is a further significant step, Mr. Speaker, that the province will be providing a division on aging within the department, a provincial advisory council whereby senior citizens can have direct input through that division to help describe and outline the policies which government should consider to have a bearing on the areas of concern of the senior citizen.

The record is, Mr. Speaker, that this government has given the senior citizens a say in the sorts of plans which were being developed for their benefit. The intention of the division, of the provincial advisory council and of local advisory councils will be directed to increasing that participation much much more.

I mentioned too, in respect to the desire to achieve independence as much as possible in the lives of senior citizens, special community support type programs that have a great bearing on the ability of people to remain in their own homes. The development in various local communities of plans and programs by volunteer agencies working through their municipal bodies and working with the province to participate in the overall funding is something we look forward to very much. The programs in the beginning are going to be perhaps on a modest scale because we want to see how they work. But it is not our intention, once the great usefulness of this type of program has been demonstrated, which we believe will be the case, to do anything other than develop them as rapidly as possible for senior citizens in their communities throughout the province. I think the volunteer component in that type of service is going to continue to be very important.

I want to conclude, Mr. Speaker, by sating I don’t want to conclude. I’d like to be able to say a great deal more. I just want to note that – if I can leave this contribution of mine to this debate on this basis. We’ve outlined the proposals we’re making in regard to senior citizens. We’ve outlined the importance of the message of independence for senior citizens in their own lives wherever they may be in Alberta, and our determination to work toward that goal which is probably – I say it again – the most important single objective we could have on their behalf.

I just wanted to give some idea of the type of input there has been, and describe very quickly a few of the reports that have come to us. These reports, for example, include: “The Continuum of Care for Senior Adults in Alberta, 1973-74”, a study conducted by the Alberta Council on Aging: “Senior Citizens Survey”, [by the] Family Service Bureau, Preventive Social Service, Smoky River, 1974; “Health Care and the Non-Institutionalized Senior Citizen in Edmonton”, an MSI research foundation study of 1973. A lot of attention had been given in regard to the Ward report, as it was frequently called, commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Development – “A Report Concerning Senior Citizens in Alberta.” That is a report I have been asked about frequently and intended to file in the Legislature. I will, therefore, file a copy of that report today, Mr. Speaker, in wrapping up my remarks now, and say to hon. members that for those of then who may be interested in that report, which had not previously been published, I have a number of copies in my office and it would be available to any hon. member who would like it.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, there are a number of others I just wanted to make reference to. “Operation New Roof” was the name of a study conducted by 10 senior citizens representing retired organizations in Edmonton. I would have liked to quote from that report and a number of the other studies, including ones going back as far as the Blair report where comments on mental health of senior citizens were remarked upon.

Mr. Speaker, I think I may be a few brief seconds over my limit and want to thank hon. members for their indulgence and their attention.