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CANADA DISABILITY BENEFIT BILL

BILL TO AMEND—SECOND READING—
DEBATE CONTINUED

Speech by:
The Honourable Patricia Bovey

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Hon. Patricia Bovey: Honourable senators, I, too, rise today to speak to Bill C-22, an act to reduce poverty and to support the financial security of persons with disabilities by establishing the Canada disability benefit and making a consequential amendment to the Income Tax Act.

I will be brief, as I have listened to my colleagues speak. I think my words will echo theirs, and I'm not going to repeat all they have said. First, I would like to thank Senator Cotter for his sponsorship of this bill and all senators who have expressed their support and concerns.

I am in support of this bill going to committee as soon as possible. Bill C-22 is laudable in its objective of reducing poverty for some of the most vulnerable people in Canada. The spirit in which this bill has been crafted has given hope to those who have been living in very difficult circumstances — as Senator Petitclerc said earlier, 6.2 million Canadians of whom 41% of working age are unemployed.

At the heart of this legislation is the step it takes to creating a more inclusive society. As Senator Cotter mentioned, basic financial security is a large part of this. I have mentioned the troubles with provincial clawbacks to benefits in this chamber before, and as with many of us here, I find that a great concern. Without agreements with the provinces and territories, we could be putting beneficiaries in a one-step-forward and two-steps-back situation, and therefore this bill will not achieve its goals.

I had the opportunity last week to talk to David Kron, Executive Director of the Cerebral Palsy Association of Manitoba, a person who has a lived experience of a disability for his whole life and someone who assists many others. Mr. Kron's greatest concern with this bill is the danger of provincial clawbacks being imposed on those who are recipients of Bill C-22's benefits. He also fears the provinces might offload their service supports to those in need.

Of Bill C-22, he told me that it:

... is a generational change as to how we support adults with disabilities in Canada, as long as there are no claw backs.

He is very supportive of the big step forward it does take. Mr. Kron also noted that he hopes the regulations that underline this bill cannot be a ruse for provinces or other jurisdictions to cut services like wheelchairs, rent assistance or other disability health supports.

This tax benefit is a critically needed step, and — I hope — it may lift many out of poverty. I am heartened by Senator Cotter's belief that there will be agreements made, but I am also

concerned about the length of these negotiations. The thought of a patchwork system across the country does not lend confidence on an equity basis for people who have struggled with inclusion for so long.

Mr. Kron told me the need for this bill is great, and that he and the Cerebral Palsy Association are truly supportive of its goal: improving the lives of people with disabilities, which we know are expensive lives. He is encouraged that it includes an appeal mechanism. He said:

The most important part of C-22 is that it is Canada-wide, enabling people to move to other regions to live with family without having to wait several years to reapply for the benefit. It seems in some jurisdictions waiting lists to get one's new provincial home's disability supports is five years, which forces people to stay where they are, often away from family.

He sees that the Canada-wide aspect of this bill will let people make those moves without that wait.

I note the provisions in the legislation that would seem to provide safeguards — the results of federal-provincial negotiations being published, for example. The most important one comes under the heading "Collaboration" in section 11.1, which states:

The Minister must provide persons with disabilities from a range of backgrounds with meaningful and barrier-free opportunities to collaborate in the development and design of the regulations, including regulations that provide for the application process, eligibility criteria, the amount of a benefit and the appeal process.

This is a very important step, and who knows the issues of the disabled community more than those who live with a disability?

Let me give you an example: My office recently hired Gemma, a young lady who has lived with disabilities her entire life and who has faced real economic challenges. She is strong, determined and has taken control of her life to the fullest extent she can. She hires her own care workers. She has written a document for us, which we will post soon, titled "GO Confidently Into Hiring: A Guide for those with Disabilities for Hiring Careworkers." While she openly refers to her financial and physical challenges, her report offers advice and insight into the entire hiring process.

With a University of Manitoba degree in Recreation Management and Community Development, Gemma has been a volunteer for three years at St. Amant, which is a home for people with high-needs disabilities. Her colleagues, who

graduated from the same program at the same time, were paid. More recently, she has had a contract with the Cerebral Palsy Association of Manitoba to run and organize two days of movement for their members. Gemma's support of Bill C-22, like that of David Kron, is strong. However, she is concerned about the potential of clawbacks, having been faced with that reality with her project in my office.

This bill will lift the lives of many, and I hope it will lift people enough to be a significant long-term help. I truly hope that section 11.1 of this bill is respected and that people with

disabilities can help develop the regulations that will flesh out this legislation. That is key to meeting the needs of the people whom this bill will affect the most.

The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology will soon study this bill, and the issues raised in this chamber will be addressed. I look forward to those discussions and testimonials.

In closing, I want to thank you all for your input and concerns as our committee moves forward.
