

Employment and Immigration

and, therefore, really should not qualify for benefits if they become unemployed. According to last year's figures, 41.7 per cent of recipients of unemployment insurance were adult women, and 45.8 per cent were adult men. When we look at the women who were receiving benefits, we see that the argument that they do not need these benefits is false.

In August of last year, Statistics Canada published a study of unemployment in 1973 and 1971. They found that in both years unemployed wives tended to come from families with low incomes. In other words, the wife had to go to work in order that the family could meet its mortgage or rent payments and pay for such items as fuel which has escalated in cost dramatically over the past few years. I understand that the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources (Mr. Gillespie) will today announce another \$2 a barrel increase in the price of fuel oil to be phased-in on July 1 and January 1. This will mean anywhere from \$25 to \$50 will be added to fuel bills over the next few winters.

It is predicted that the cost of food will go up, and that general inflation will continue to rise. Is it any wonder that many wives have to go out and work in order to pay for the essentials of life such as food, shelter and clothing? They are not frivolous attachments to the work force. They are not there just to earn a few extra bucks in order to buy a coloured TV or a snow machine. They are earning essential income for the family. To say they can be disposed of, that it is all right to cut them off unemployment insurance if they become unemployed, is a cruel and callous attitude on the part of the minister and the government toward the hundreds of thousands of dependants of those women and their spouses.

When we look at the statistics compiled by the government's own agency, we find that in 1973 the unemployment rate for all wives was 13.5 per cent, for those from families with incomes between \$4,000 and \$6,999, 21.4 per cent, and for those from families with incomes over \$15,000 a year the unemployment rate was 8.6 per cent. This proves that unemployed wives who are collecting unemployment insurance come from low income families. They are trying to get work. It usually winds up that they get seasonal employment. They are laid off first because they do not have professional training. I am not speaking of those who are nurses, legal secretaries, and so on. I am speaking of the cleaning women in hotels and other establishments, clerks in department stores, and similar jobs. That is a very insecure kind of employment. These are the ones who are laid off and become unemployed. They are the ones who need the income for their families. However, they are the ones this minister wants to disqualify from receiving unemployment insurance benefits for a few weeks, based on the time they have worked.

In light of a worsening employment situation which the minister and the government are predicting, and increasing costs which economists are predicting, to pursue this line of action will create all kinds of hardship. It will come back to haunt this government. The government thinks it can run the next election campaign solely on the issue of national unity. I say now that they are in for a rude shock. If this bill and these

[Mr. Symes.]

amendments pass, it will disqualify more people and reduce their unemployment insurance benefits. Therefore, unemployment will hurt Canadians much more than it has over the past few years. This minister will be held responsible to all the Senator Daveys and others for contributing to a reduction in the number of Liberal members who come back to this House after the next election.

The government advances the argument that they need to bring in these various amendments and cut back the benefits because the unemployment insurance fund is breaking the government. They say it is becoming so costly that they cannot fund it any more. Therefore, they have to reduce the number of people on the roles. Let us look at the figures to see whether that kind of argument holds up. In 1975, when unemployment stood at 7.1 per cent, the unemployment insurance account produced a surplus of \$321 million after pay-outs of \$3.1 billion in benefits. This year, of course, the government has reduced its share of the cost of unemployment insurance from 54 per cent to 38 per cent, thanks to Bill C-69.

We find that the government really will not be suffering. It announced it was suspending the anticipated increase in employee-employer premiums that was set to go into effect on January 1, 1977, with a saving of \$250 million to contributors. What was the reason given for the suspension? It was that the money will not be needed, even though unemployment will be as high as it has been in previous times. They know that when they pass this legislation the benefits will be reduced. The reasoning of the government just boggles the mind. It fails to get down to the business of creating jobs. It finds it easier to tinker with the unemployment insurance system and hurt those least able to defend themselves, the unemployed workers in this country. I consider that to be a backward and disastrous move.

● (1250)

Mr. Derek Blackburn (Brant): I have only a few minutes left, Mr. Speaker, and I want to make a few brief comments. I hope the minister is listening. It seems to me that some of the most desperate people in the country today are those who have been laid off and are in their fifties or early sixties and may be physically disabled to some extent. I have in mind people who have worked for small companies which do not have sickness or accident benefit schemes or pre-retirement security measures.

Would the minister care to comment on the feasibility of placing such persons, male or female, in a special category within the act so they would not be subjected to the same harsh rules that are applicable to younger workers? I am speaking, now, of men and women who are beyond retraining because of their age, people who are marginally skilled, or unskilled. They may, for example, be suffering from high blood pressure or heart trouble and consequently could not pass a health test or fit into a group insurance plan even if jobs were available to them. Many of them have become welfare cases, which is extremely downgrading for them as individuals.