

*Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971*

suggestion made so far from the government side about providing some other suitable plan.

There is one other matter I should like to talk about for a little while and it has to do with the administration of unemployment insurance. When this bill becomes law, the Unemployment Insurance Commission will again be charged with the administration of the system. As in the past, the Commission is given wide latitude in respect to the way in which the administration is carried out. I notice there is a clause in the bill before us which provides for the Commission to establish branch offices as it sees fit, and a similar section exists in the present act. I have been looking over a book called "Instant World" which was tabled in the House recently by the Minister of Communications (Mr. Kierans). There is one sentence in it which strikes me as being most apropos to the whole matter we are considering. If the minister will look at page 39 of this publication he will see that in summarizing the seminars which were held on the subject of telecommunications and computers the following words are used:

It was evident that most participants were deeply concerned with the need to put "soul" into the system.

I believe this is an ever-growing concern among people throughout the world. They seem to feel lost in some vast, soulless system which crushes and grinds them until they do not know which way to turn. The aspects of this feeling which are brought out in the report on telecommunications and computers to which I have just referred are in many ways frightening. I now suggest that many Canadian working people have gone through some frightening and frustrating experiences of lack of soul in the administration of unemployment insurance. The fact that we are now revising the act gives us an opportunity to deal with these shortcomings in a way which has not been possible for a long time. It is essential that we do so. We could develop the finest system of unemployment insurance benefits—on paper at least—that could be imagined; it could look perfect in its provisions, even to somebody like my hon. friend from Winnipeg North Centre, yet if the cheques did not get out of the computers and into the hands of the workers the whole system would be worth less than the paper on which it was written.

At least some of the working people in Canada, and, to my knowledge, a good many of the working people in my own constituency, feel so frustrated by the remoteness of the administration of unemployment insurance, so helpless when faced by these impersonal machines, that they have given up trying to get the benefits to which they are properly entitled. They say it is easier to go down to the welfare office and get social welfare payments. In fact, some of the workers on Vancouver Island have been doing just that.

I bring this up because going about my constituency during the recent recess I sensed strongly that this feeling had been growing to such an extent as to put the whole concept of unemployment insurance in jeopardy. The feeling has been aggravated by the introduction of computers into the system of administration, though it does not arise entirely from suspicion of the computer. I

[Mr. Barnett.]

have here a file which dates back to 1967 when a policy of phasing out local unemployment insurance offices was inaugurated. I suppose that in my constituency there are some 70,000 people, many of whom may be subject to interruptions in their earnings to a greater extent than are workers in other parts of the country, yet there is not one properly qualified unemployment insurance claims representative in the whole constituency.

• (4:30 p.m.)

I have been raising this matter ever since this phasing out first took place. I have some letters that admit there were some bugs because it was something new, that assert that this business of handling claims by long distance would settle down and there would be no further problems. But these problems have kept recurring and recurring, and quite frankly all the answers I have been able to get in this House have simply been an attempt to smother the situation in soft soap. That is the only way I can assess the situation judging by results. The situation in this last winter has, if anything, been worse than before.

I do not know that I want to take the time of the House to read the kind of replies that I have received from ministers of labour and top administrative officials of the Unemployment Insurance Commission in Ottawa because the list is lengthy. I have some correspondence of more recent vintage which I will refer to, but I wonder what is the use of even bothering the genial Minister of Labour about this? Certainly, unless something a little more drastic happens than has been the case in the past when I have written to the minister or the commission or asked a question in the House, this situation is not going to improve.

I should like to make reference to an answer I received on a "late show" presentation in 1969. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour concluded his reply with these words:

I assure you, Mr. Speaker, that persons living in Campbell River are receiving good and fast service from the Unemployment Insurance Commission, as is the case everywhere in Canada. However the commission will re-examine its operations in the area to determine whether it would be possible to expedite the system somewhat at periods of peak claim activity—

That is the kind of answer I have been receiving ever since 1967 about this administrative question. I did receive some more communications earlier this year. I have one from the secretary of the Port Alberni local of the IWA dated February 18, 1971. Part of this letter reads as follows:

The number of calls that we have had for assistance are beyond numbering and I would guess that during the months of December and January there were telephone calls at our expense at least once every second day. In addition to those calls the Nanaimo Unemployment Insurance Commission office has co-operated in placing calls back to this office.

I want to make it very clear that I am not speaking in condemnation of the attempts that have been made by some people in the field to cope with this problem; it is simply that they have not been given the tools or the