

● (2032)

[English]

Mr. Jake Epp (Provencher): Mr. Speaker, I intend to present to the House the views of the official opposition as they have been outlined by speakers from this side of the House. The minister served notice today that he would be moving a time allocation motion tomorrow. It therefore becomes imperative, considering the number of amendments on the order paper, that Your Honour give us some latitude with respect to dealing with the motions which are on the order paper and not restrict our comments specifically to the first one.

As members who came here in 1972, and those who were here previously in 1971, know, no topic has created greater controversy than the unemployment insurance bill of 1971 and the amendments thereto. It seems that every year or so amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act give occasion to the Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration to study unemployment insurance. Those who have been regular members of that committee, as well as departmental officials, have sat through interminable hours looking at legislation, the unemployment insurance system—

Mr. Cullen: And each other.

Mr. Epp: —and each other, as the minister says, and hopefully some light has been shed on the situation which now confronts us. Despite the differing opinions which exist with regard to unemployment insurance, it must be said that on balance committee members were sincere in the views they held and expressed. I know that the committee experience was advantageous to the process, at least to the discussion of Bill C-14. I am not always sure about that when it comes to the examination of estimates, but I think that has been the case with Bill C-14.

Members generally would have to say that opinions on the unemployment insurance program fall into two categories. First, some members of parliament and some members of the public generally look upon the Unemployment Insurance Commission as having a responsibility to administer an unemployment insurance plan, and to them the emphasis is on insurance. Others look at the Unemployment Insurance Commission—especially since the 1971 act—and say that insurance principles cannot apply to the same degree as transfer payments or individual transfer payments.

Some people would even go so far as to say that unemployment insurance is a major part of a public move toward a guaranteed annual income. Whatever the case, I think what is imperative to most Canadians is that unemployment insurance policy should do a number of things. First, obviously it should insure people against unemployment during periods of time between jobs. It should insure people who are legitimately unemployed and who are looking for work but cannot find it. I do not think there is too much argument about that, regardless of the views held as to what the program should do in addition.

Unemployment Insurance Act

Second, I think there is a widespread feeling that the program is being abused. There is the attitude that there is widespread abuse, and this is one reason why people feel that unemployment insurance policy must be seriously revamped. All of us hear about abuse taking place.

Third, I think it is generally agreed that the total amount of spending on the unemployment insurance program is too high. It is now running in excess of \$4 billion. That is a very substantial part of Canada's total national expenditures.

I would like to add a fourth dimension which I believe unemployment insurance policy should reflect. Emphasis should be placed on using funds which are now used for unemployment insurance payments for skill creation and in positive, productive undertakings such as job creation. Those funds should not be used just for pay-outs. I know there is controversy about that, but if we are ever going to get ourselves out of the chronic unemployment we now experience, we will have to spend more time on and give more consideration to using some of the funds which are now expended on unemployment insurance benefits for job creation or employment incentives.

My comments are based primarily on those thoughts and on how we can make employment an incentive rather than looking at the disincentives which are inherent in our unemployment insurance policy.

The minister proposes to reduce the amount of insured benefits from two-thirds to 60 per cent, approximately a 10 per cent reduction. By his own calculations the minister feels that this will result in a saving of approximately \$910 million. In the committee we proposed that the bill be amended.

Mr. Benjamin: Buy him a shovel.

Mr. Nystrom: Stick to the amendment.

Mr. Epp: Members of the NDP are particularly jumpy tonight. I do not know why.

Mr. Nowlan: They all get jumpy at Christmas time because they are a bunch of hypocrites.

Mr. Epp: I suggest that they listen. If they did, even I have hope that they might learn something.

Mr. Nowlan: I don't.

Mr. Epp: There are various figures dealing with heads of families who have dependants. I think a figure of 14 per cent or 15 per cent is generally accepted as the percentage of heads of families who have dependent children and who draw unemployment insurance benefits, but if we expand that definition to include not just children but also dependent spouses and dependent parents, the figure is about 25 per cent or 26 per cent. For my purposes tonight I will use the figure of approximately 25 per cent. Approximately 25 per cent of unemployment insurance benefit recipients are persons who have obligations, as family heads, for dependants. I think it stands to reason that the blame for abuse and high costs does not lie