

Unemployment Insurance Act

Mr. Hales: The hon. member was the minister responsible at the time the government found it necessary to put a ceiling of \$800 million into the act. Less than 18 months later, he and this government recommend that that ceiling be removed. Why was it necessary in the first place, and why do they now want it removed?

• (1540)

Mr. Mackasey: That is a fair question and it is one which has been asked of the officials in the committee. I attempted to answer it on second reading. The original concept did not include the \$800 million, or any ceiling. The hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander) as well as the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) made that point. The ceiling was introduced at the request of the Department of Finance which felt that, because of the number of variables in the future, it would be desirable to insert one rather than try to anticipate the sums of money which should be paid from year to year in anticipation of the rate of unemployment. They felt there were so many variables, they could hardly anticipate with a certain amount of accuracy the amounts which would be needed at various levels of unemployment. Events have proven that they have been unable to do this with any degree of accuracy.

The main point, as the hon. gentleman appreciates, is that this is an advance which must be repaid. As I mentioned, when the figures are totalled up in April we shall find that the government owes the government all but \$159 million. What we felt, therefore, was that the inclusion of a ceiling was convenient and we could anticipate unemployment in the future. I think, upon reflection, that our original concept of not including a ceiling made sense. Obviously, it does to the government today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I believe the hon. member's time has expired and there is an objection to another question being asked. I now recognize the hon. member for Yukon.

Mr. Erik Nielsen (Yukon): Mr. Speaker, today and yesterday we witnessed the most astonishing spectacle. We witnessed the return of the former minister of labour, who appears to be answering for the government. We have heard nothing from the Minister of Manpower and Immigration (Mr. Andras) whose responsibility this bill is. There has been no statement from him. Regrettably, he was ill during some of the most important committee sittings and we had no opportunity of putting questions to him, or of getting answers. Not only were we denied that opportunity of questioning the minister, but having reviewed the record of the proceedings of the standing committee, as well as the debate on second reading, I can say we were disadvantaged by the tactics of members like the hon. member for Windsor-Walkerville (Mr. MacGuigan) who was constantly, in the standing committee, as is very apparent from a reading of the proceedings, intervening and preventing the witnesses before the committee from answering legitimate questions being put by members.

Moreover, the Minister of Justice (Mr. Lang) acted as prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner. Does Your Honour think that one of the members on that committee, unless he was on the government side, or a member of the

[Mr. Mackasey.]

NDP, got any answers? They were prevented at every turn. Yet the former minister of manpower and immigration speaks of providing information; he speaks of the usefulness of standing committees in dealing with matters of this nature. We got nothing there and we are getting nothing here from the minister—nothing from the minister of manpower who has been sitting mute in his seat throughout this debate, except for one or two interjections.

I am surprised at the hon. member for Verdun (Mr. Mackasey). I have known him for many years and he has usually struck me as being a fair person. I believe he made a sincere effort when he was holding the portfolio, which I think he was forced to resign because of a fundamental difference with his cabinet colleagues. What really surprised me was his manner of approaching this debate. He did the same thing on second reading. On the one hand, he says he likes to be fair and non-partisan, and to discuss the merits of an issue such as this without injecting party politics. Yet he proceeds to do just that. He has been deliberately distorting the views expressed by my hon. friend from Hamilton West and deliberately distorting a position we made abundantly clear on the second reading of this bill, as well as during the debate now under way.

He accuses us on this side of adopting tactics of delay for the sole purpose of preventing unemployed persons from obtaining unemployment insurance benefits. That, Mr. Speaker, is as far from the truth as can be imagined. Persons legitimately unemployed are required to be paid benefits by the law, and we intend to see that they are.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Nielsen: Members opposite have no monopoly on desire to apply the law, certainly not hon. members to my left in their sanctimonious approach to this whole subject. The hon. member for Verdun says the hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe (Mr. Wagner) voted against Bill C-124, indicating a wish on his part to prevent payment of unemployment insurance benefits. That is a paraphrase of what the hon. member said, but he did make that accusation. The hon. member for Verdun knows this is not the position. So why does he say such a thing? He says he reviewed the discussion in committee. He knows whereof I speak when I say that the hon. member for Windsor-Walkerville adopted delaying tactics, tactics deliberately designed to prevent us eliciting information from witnesses. At one stage, the chairman of the committee was asked question after question and on each occasion either the member for Windsor-Walkerville or the Minister of Justice intervened. This went on for over an hour.

The principle of the bill we are discussing today is not as the former minister stated it. The principle of the bill is two-fold. First, it would remove the ceiling, thereby, we say, removing parliamentary control. Second, it sets out to legalize what we say was illegal in the first place. I am referring to clause two. The hon. member for Verdun tries to destroy our position with respect to clause one of the bill by saying that we maintain control and that we do so in ten ways.

He says, first, that we are able to do so because figures are published by Statistics Canada every month. These