

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT

MEASURE TO AMEND

The House resumed consideration of Bill C-14, to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971, as reported (with amendments) from the Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration.

Mr. Arnold Peters (Timiskaming): Before we were interrupted by private members' hour, Mr. Speaker, I was saying that the government has decided to save a billion dollars. This saving is to be achieved principally through adding to the burden on the backs of the working people, particularly those in areas of high unemployment.

It is very interesting to note that although the unemployment insurance fund was presumably actuarially sound when it was established, it now shows a drain of \$2 billion. This has certainly been a political football. The Liberal party has won a couple of elections by promising to include people who were not intended to be included when the Unemployment Insurance Act was first enacted. Now it appears that contributions of employers and employees are to be reduced simply because there is a surplus of about \$400 million in the fund. This indicates that up to the point where workers and employers were to carry the unemployment insurance plan, the plan was sound.

Where the difficulty arises, Mr. Speaker, is that ten years ago 4 per cent unemployment was considered too high. I remember that the New Democratic Party felt a reasonable figure would be 1 per cent and that this would take care of the turnover of people who looked for jobs in other fields, those being transferred, or such things as retraining and reclassification programs. We certainly thought that 4 per cent unemployment was too high. In the last ten years the government has increased the intervention point from 4 per cent to 5.5 per cent, to 6.5 per cent and now, according to this bill, the trigger figure is 11.5 per cent. I suppose the government considers that things are not bad if it is less than 11.5 per cent. If it goes over that figure I do not know who is going to handle it. Certainly the government apparently does not intend to participate in the unemployment insurance fund in order to carry that kind of unemployment.

Whether 4 per cent, 10 per cent or 50 per cent is the acceptable level, it is the unemployed person who is affected, not the worker. It is the unemployed person who worries how to cope with his situation, whether he loses his car or his house. Even whether he loses his wife and family sometimes depends on how long he is unemployed.

The cost is immense in a social sense, Mr. Speaker. It may well be that we should not be covering social costs through unemployment insurance and should not be making arrangements for the well-being of citizens in lieu of employment. The way to help the unemployed is to give them jobs.

Unemployment Insurance Act

When I first started paying unemployment insurance it was a simple proposition. I do not know how we allowed this government to get into this mess. There was cyclical unemployment then too, but not to the degree we have it now.

The Liberal party bragged about how many more people are working today. That is all right for the person who is employed, but the one who is unemployed and cannot buy his children Christmas presents or pay the light bill is not helped by knowing that the Liberal government is able to provide jobs for more Canadians than ever before. There are more people in Canada today than ever before, Mr. Speaker, so the only figure that has relevance is the percentage of the population that is working. Unemployment has an immense effect on the individual concerned.

The government is really saying to employers and employees that they have done very well. The government is saying, "You have \$400 million excess in the kitty, you have a surplus. It is so high that, under the act, we have to reduce it, so we are reducing the premiums to you people."

● (2012)

They have not covered the problems about which, I am sure, everybody in the street speaks. They have not covered the problem of your neighbour who came from a big construction job where he made \$20,000 and is now on unemployment insurance. No one knows where he got the \$20,000 construction job or where he spent his summer, but he is supposed to have made a large amount of money and he is supposed to live the rest of the year on unemployment insurance. We are not doing anything about him, nor are we doing anything about the people about whom the minister is speaking, such as the women who are the abusers of this system. We are not doing anything about the young people in that sense.

What we are doing is to say that it will be much harder for women to get into the labour force and that they will be treated less advantageously than other segments of the population. We are saying to the young people that they are repeaters because they do not have permanent jobs. I suggest, Mr. Speaker, that they are lucky to get any kind of job.

Your son and mine who go to college find that it is almost mandatory for them to find a summer job of some kind to qualify for the benefits they will need to put them through college. They will take any kind of job. Sure, these are temporary jobs and they are not the kind of job they expect to put them into the labour force, but they are the best jobs they can find.

All of our young people are plagued with the problems of having no particular training for a career job and very few of them have any experience after living on a farm, working in a store, or doing some such work because of their parents' occupation. Most young people do not have experience in any form which would enable them to get a better job. These are the people we are cutting off, these are the people we are hurting, and it will create an immense problem.

I would have no problem at all walking into an unemployment insurance office and collecting unemployment insurance.