

Labour Adjustment Benefits

and, with over one million people unemployed, this would be the bill that would justify another of the government's highly questionable tactics.

By showing such contempt for the parliamentary system, such little regard for the right of members to know in advance the subject matter of debate and by resorting to arbitrary and even underhanded methods in altering the agreed upon agenda of this House, the government is showing a disregard for the thoughts, feelings and opinions of the Canadian people.

In these days of plant closings and record high unemployment, this is an important bill, a serious bill, a bill that acknowledges, even if it does not remedy, the grave unemployment situation that exists in the country. Surely with over one million people unemployed the government might have wished to have every effort brought to bear on improving Bill C-78 so that it could be the best possible bill as it relates to what is happening in our labour market today. Surely such a bill should not be the object of a political football game.

Obviously the government had no wish or desire to listen. It was politically expedient to introduce the bill today. If the government has no respect for the opposition and is going to deny the opposition an opportunity to do its homework and consult with constituents in order to prepare for debate, then this House and our system of government has no place in the scheme of things. The people of Canada, I can assure you, will think otherwise. Bill C-78 is a very serious and important bill.

I am sorry that the Minister of Labour (Mr. Caccia) is not in the House to listen to the official response to this bill, Mr. Speaker. During committee consideration of the bill he did show some degree of flexibility and inclination to accept and adopt recommendations from members of the opposition. He spoke of the necessity for progressive labour legislation, and because of this was prepared to accept some of the changes that are now proposed. He, too, must have some regrets that Bill C-78 is treated in such a cavalier, shoddy fashion. I rather suspect, unless I have completely misjudged the minister, that he is aware that Bill C-78 is not going to receive the thoughtful consideration it deserves.

The minister introduced some important amendments but these have been available for consideration for less than two weeks. The amendments warrant further consideration. We want to assure the minister of speedy passage but would point out that further co-operation and flexibility will be necessary. That opportunity has been denied by the minister and the government and this will be to the detriment of the bill and the laid-off workers it is intended to serve.

The riding of St. Catharines—a city I am proud to represent in this House—is particularly affected by this legislation. Just today the largest employer in the community, General Motors, announced a further lay-off of 2,400 or 2,600 workers. The economic effect of that lay-off is serious enough, but the social and human impact is tragic. It is simply one of a series of such lay-offs that have been going on for several months. Over all, on a percentage basis, the St. Catharines-Niagara region leads the country in unemployment. Literally tens of thousands of workers left the area in 1981 to find jobs elsewhere.

While there is no question that the group hardest hit by unemployment is the youth of this country, with other members of this House I am deeply concerned by the growing numbers of people over the age of 50 who, for the first time in their lives, are suddenly out of work. These people have lived in the community, shared its economic and social benefits and woes, have established family units, and now what are these more senior among us to do?

Mr. Caccia: Mr. Speaker, a point of order. It has just been brought to my attention that the hon. member for St. Catharines (Mr. Reid) made reference to the fact that I was not in the House a few moments ago. I left for a couple of minutes and I should like to bring to his attention that I am back.

Mr. Reid (St. Catharines): Mr. Speaker, I noticed the return of the hon. minister after the comment was made.

I had just mentioned that thousands of the people on lay-off have established themselves in their communities and are now over 50 years of age. What are these senior people to do? Most available jobs—and they are few—are not for those over 50. Retraining is not attractive to them and is barely available even if it were attractive.

I want to bring to the attention of the House another instance in my community. For some months I have been trying to assist employees of Lightning Fastener Company in the city of St. Catharines. The plant was closed and employment terminated. The employees have not only had to endure the loss of a job but have encountered red tape and problem after problem when trying to find alternate employment before their unemployment insurance or severance pay ran out. For some, all this has been compounded by the November 12 budget which swooped down and taxed severance pay. They, and members on this side of the House, are continuing to fight that proposal.

I could cite further examples but the point is that we are not only faced with an unemployment problem, but for the first time since the thirties, that other depression, we are seeing the unemployment problem catch up with the more senior employee, the person over 50 years of age.

Bill C-78 is a limited though welcome response to this growing problem. I should like to outline briefly how this proposed legislation would work and offer some comments on how it could be improved.

One of our greatest concerns is that the bill will become bogged down in bureaucracy. This must be guarded against if the plan is to work at all. When a worker is laid off, the normal procedure is for him or her to apply for unemployment insurance benefits.

May I digress for just a moment, Mr. Speaker. The inability of the different departments of government to cope with the process is becoming evident again. The biggest boner of all was the move of the Department of Veterans Affairs to Prince Edward Island and the insistence that the Pension Commission go along with it. As everyone in the house knows, that has