

Unemployment Insurance Act

some level of unemployment in our society beyond which we should not permit conditions to get worse.

The other two aspects of this legislation to which we have objected, and on which our party as well as the official opposition have proposed amendments, is the removal of all persons, once they reach the age of 65, from the benefits of the unemployment insurance scheme. Quite apart from the fact that the savings to the scheme by this removal are minimal in dollars and cents, I think it is in principle a wrong and unacceptable idea. The fact is that the majority of people in our country, according to a study which was prepared a few weeks ago for the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde), who are at the pensionable age live in poverty. That means the millions of senior citizens who live in poverty and who want to continue to work, not because they have a profound desire to continue doing the kind of work that they are doing, but they want to do so because they have to get the income in order to eke out an existence in Canada, will be deprived of unemployment insurance benefits.

We say it is wrong to say to a man or a woman in our country who is 65 years old and who is compelled to work because of the inadequacy of a private pension or the inadequacy of a public pension, "Thou shalt not work because, in effect, thou shalt not get unemployment insurance benefits if you do work". We in this party cannot understand why the government should have brought in such an amendment to the law. As I say, it saves a pittance in terms of the cost of the scheme, and in terms of what it is saying to our senior citizens with any sense of equity or fairness, it is totally unacceptable.

● (1420)

The third consideration which is of particular importance to members of our party is the removal of the special benefits which accrue to working Canadians who are at the lowest level of the income scale, benefits which enabled them to receive up to 75 per cent of their average income while unemployed. We think it is scandalous, at a time when we have high levels of inflation, to remove this benefit. What we had in the act before the government brought in this amendment was a provision which said that a small number of workers—let us remember that this is a very small category, the working poor—would receive up to 75 per cent of what they earned during periods of unemployment, which meant for most, I suspect, no more than \$60 or so per week. They will no longer receive that. They must receive the same level of benefit as the rest of the work force in Canada which is better off. Any party which has any concern for the poor people of Canada, and in this instance the working poor, should not have brought in this kind of amendment. For this reason we cannot accept a bill which contains this kind of provision.

In concluding my comments, this bill symbolizes for us this government's attitude toward ordinary people since it formed its majority in July, 1974. I am not going to trot out, again, all the promises upon which the government has reneged. That has been done in previous debates by the official opposition and by members of my party. All the things the government claimed it would do for ordinary Canadians in the July election of 1974 have totally gone out the window. The package of proposals which was brought in on Thursday night shows a heartless sense of

[Mr. Broadbent.]

reality and a heartless sense of perspective on Canadian society. The government produced a restraint program which affected virtually every sector of our country and every type of occupation and brought in amendments to family allowances which removed the escalator clauses.

This will mean that the poverty of poor people will be worse in 1976. It means the burden will be transferred to the municipalities and the provinces, who will have to make this up in increased welfare payments because the federal government has neglected its responsibility. This unemployment insurance bill should not be seen as an isolated matter in a package of programs which was otherwise disposed to do something for the average and the poor in this country. Quite the contrary, it is fully consistent with the heartless, indifferent and callous attitude toward ordinary people that we have seen from this government and from this Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) since July, 1974.

I hope after the new year, when hon. members on the government side go back to their constituencies and hear the responses from their communities to the cut-backs the government has announced, they will come back with a new attitude. However, I suspect their attitude will not change and that only through the efforts of the opposition in this House in the weeks and months ahead might we be able down the road to have a change in attitude on the part of the government.

When the Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues, who were basically the same ones we have now, received their majority in 1968, we saw how indifferent the Liberal party could be when it had a substantial majority. It behaved somewhat differently during the minority government. But it is now back to its lofty and arrogant self and the problems of ordinary people are going out the window. Unfortunately, that is likely to remain the situation until the next election, and when the next election comes I will remind the government of what happened in 1972. My hunch is that the change in 1978, or whenever the election comes, will be more substantial than it was in 1972.

Mr. Gillies: There will be no NDP members left.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Charles-Eugène Dionne (Kamouraska): In connection with the Unemployment Insurance Act, Mr. Speaker, the Department of Manpower and Immigration published in 1973 a booklet dealing with the new approach of the Unemployment Insurance Commission and its aim which, as summarized in the first pages, was to provide an income on a temporary basis to every insured person who is unemployed and to help him or her to rejoin the labour market. It was a summary of good intentions. And further, it even added: . . . its awareness of the problems resulting from emergency payments. It referred to possible emergency payments. If all normal corrective measures proved worthless, a cheque could be issued within 24 hours. It could even be issued within 8 hours through manual processing, and within 4 hours by the head of the district office who is empowered to sign cheques on an emergency basis. Such cheques were not issued very often. The fact that the administration of the Unemployment Insurance Act is lacking in many respects was fully demonstrated in a press release dated October 27, 1975 on Bill C-69, which has been