

Unemployment Insurance Act

This is a good bill. I appreciate the solid support I have had from my colleagues. We have made the changes that needed to be made. We listened to the hon. member for Churchill when he had a significant point to make, and we have made that change. We considered recommendations made not only by the NDP but also by the official opposition; we found them significantly wanting. We will still carry on a study and make this an even better bill, but heaven help us if we had accepted some of the suggestions made by members opposite.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): Heaven will not help you now.

Miss Flora MacDonald (Kingston and the Islands): Mr. Speaker, I have listened with real interest to the minister's defence of this bill, a bill which does not improve with the retelling and restating of it as the minister has tried to do in the last few minutes. I have also listened with some real interest to his defence of his flexibility, and I wonder where that flexibility was when he had the representations of the ten provinces before him on how this bill should be improved. I wonder where that vaunted flexibility was when he had representations from women's groups across this country as to how the penalty provisions could be improved. I wonder where that vaunted flexibility was when he listened to his colleagues, the hon. member for South Western Nova (Miss Campbell), the hon. member for Charlevoix (Mr. Lapointe) and the hon. member for Hochelaga (Mr. Lavoie). Where was the flexibility of which he spoke? His flexibility seemed to be limited to a few of the business groups which appeared before him, presumably during private sessions. That was the flexibility he showed. Then he came before us in final reading and asked us to take for granted the fact that the bill is a good one. Some of us did not think it was a good bill in the first place, and we do not believe it is a good bill at third reading.

● (1502)

I have listened to the rationalizations of the minister and other members of the government in defence of the bill, but surely there is very little which can be said in defence of the bill because of two major glaring weaknesses in it. The weaknesses will have an impact long beyond the initial blow to concerned individuals, and long beyond the adverse effect it will have on individual constituencies and even the people who represent them at the present time.

The minister did not deal with the two major weaknesses in any of his remarks, or when he went off on different tangents. Indeed, they are more than weaknesses. They seem to be deliberate moves by the government against two of the most vulnerable groups in Canadian society. The moves seem to be designed to weaken their tenuous position and to undermine the fragile base on which they exist in Canada. Despite what the minister said, and despite all his protestations, these two moves are against the have-not regions of Canada and against women.

In the first of these, the shellfire of the government is levelled against Atlantic Canada and eastern Quebec, in large

[Mr. Cullen.]

measure. The provisions in the bill addressed to seasonal workers, entrants and re-entrants, will be much more onerous on the Atlantic and eastern Quebec regions than on any other parts of the country. The minister did not mention that when he put up his defence of the bill. I single out the Atlantic region because I know it well. I know what the costs will be, not just in dollar terms as applied to the bill, but also what it will mean in limited opportunities being further reduced, in entrenched difficulties being further aggravated, in the hopes and dreams of individuals already restricted being denied totally. The bill goes further than severing the lifeline which is often needed by individuals in Atlantic Canada. It has very negative implications in terms of the unity of the country. The minister did not address that because he and the Liberal party do not understand how the bill can impact on the unity of the country.

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Miss MacDonald: Hon. members opposite laugh, but there are more dimensions to unity than those to which the government will ever address itself.

Mr. Breau: Did you listen to the hon. member for Carleton-Charlotte (Mr. McCain)?

Miss MacDonald: How often have hon. members opposite extolled their self-professed ability to hold the country together? How often have they paraded their pious virtue in this regard? As has been shown in this bill, their actions speak louder than their words. The bill is a perfect example of their lack of understanding of a region of the country continually being set back by the social and economic policies of the government. It has a sorry record of reducing regional disparity in the country, but the bill will do much to worsen it. That affects not only the region concerned, but threatens the fabric of the entire country. The government does not seem to understand and realize that is being created, as it moves more and more against Atlantic Canada. It does not seem to realize, in making its moves, that the balance among the regions is further aggravated.

This measure has tremendous implication for the delicate equilibrium which must keep all regions of the country in proper balance. It is not original or new to say that eastern Quebec and the Atlantic region are the most disadvantaged regions in the country in terms of personal incomes and resource revenues. It is not new, and it is sad that one has to repeat it. The bill will mean a further loss of income in Atlantic Canada at a time when the provincial economies of that part of the country can ill afford it.

Mr. Breau: Not true.

Miss MacDonald: The hon. member for Gloucester (Mr. Breau) said that is not true. To his province it will mean a loss of revenue of \$62.7 million. That is what it will mean to the provincial economy of New Brunswick. It will mean a loss of \$13.1 million to Prince Edward Island; a loss of \$52.2 million to Newfoundland; and a loss of \$43.8 million to Nova Scotia.