

*Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971*

value. I say to the minister that the fishermen to whom I have talked are not prepared to accept that statement as something to which they can agree in relation to this bill, without discounting the truth of what the minister said. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the fishermen would sooner be provided with definite coverage under the Unemployment Insurance Act, which is in the tender hands of the Minister of Labour, than be pushed more completely under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Fisheries and Forestry. In British Columbia, where we have been having legislation by press release with regard to the licencing of salmon fishermen, the fishermen want no part of any scheme that the Minister of Fisheries is likely to devise. If for no other reason, I urge the House to reconsider the position of the fishermen under this legislation.

I find it completely incomprehensible that the government would even think of bringing forward this piece of legislation for second reading without at least having given first reading to the measure in the mind of the government as far as the fishermen are concerned. It is not as though this idea had been suddenly sprung upon us. It has been lying around since 1961 when the Gill commission report was tabled. There has been adequate time for the fullest consideration to have been given to possible alternatives for the fishermen. In the absence of any such alternative at this time, we can only conclude that the government has failed to come up with any alternative that approaches what they, let alone the fishermen, feel would be a suitable alternative.

The fishermen feel as though they are being pushed from pillar to post. They are becoming increasingly desperate. If they are not made the victims of incursions from foreign fishing fleets, they are suffering from the degradation of the environment as a result of other industrial activities in this country. They are constantly being hemmed in by new and more restricted legislation of the Department of Fisheries in an effort to conserve depleting stocks of various fisheries. The amount of time which fishermen are allowed to work is being reduced. They become involuntarily unemployed at the whim of the Department of Fisheries. If any group of workers is subject to the hazard of interruption of earnings, it is the fishermen of this country. This is one of the most important omissions in the thinking of this government with regard to what should be considered a more universal application of unemployment insurance.

In his speech, the Minister of Labour stated that there are welfare connotations attached to the present unemployment insurance scheme for fishermen. I do not quarrel with that statement, but I would like to point out if there are welfare connotations attached to the plan which was developed for fishermen, they were brought in by a Liberal government. I can remember when the then Minister of Labour introduced this plan after I had been arguing for coverage for the fishermen of British Columbia for two or three sessions. I remember saying to the minister that even in their wildest dreams the fishermen never expected the government to come up with a plan like the one that was being introduced then.

In many respects, the existing plan is completely topsy-turvy. The fishermen in British Columbia who need the coverage least are able to draw the benefits. The men who suffer are not eligible because of the lack of the necessary number of fishing stamps. It is true that more money has been paid out of the fund to fishermen than they have contributed through their premiums. I think if one were to examine the situation closely, occupation by occupation, he would find a great many other groups of workers in various parts of the country that have drawn more by way of benefits than they have put into the fund by way of premiums over the years.

Rather than maintaining this present unsatisfactory position which leaves the fishermen up in the air, not knowing where they are going to be, the sensible thing would be for the members of the standing committee of this House who study this bill to do a thorough rewrite of the present arrangements for unemployment insurance coverage for fishermen. For a long time, I have been saying that they are obvious faults and flaws in the present arrangement. In fact, I have been saying this ever since the plan was introduced. I think this would be a realistic approach for the committee to take. Even at this time, I hope that on reflection the Minister of Labour will accept this idea and persuade his colleagues in the cabinet also to accept it.

• (4:20 p.m.)

The minister did make reference to the old argument that fishermen are self-employed as an excuse for eliminating them from coverage under the plan. But everyone who really understands the situation in the fishing areas of Canada knows that fishermen are working people subject to the interruption of their earnings to a larger extent than many other categories of workers. As far as I am concerned, this is all the more reason for devising a technique to make sure that they benefit from coverage, not on the basis of welfare but as participants in the work force. It is true they may have more tools and equipment with which to carry out their occupation than other workers possess, but many of the workers covered by the legislation do provide at least part of the tools required to enable them to do their jobs.

My hon. friend from Winnipeg North Centre touched upon this question of unemployment insurance for self-employed people and expressed some hope that coverage could be extended so as to cover this class of worker. A good deal of experience has been accumulated about this particular group, the fishermen, because they have been covered by the act for a number of years. A start in the direction indicated by my hon. friend might well be made with this particular group of workers. We could examine the flaws in the existing plan and devise steps to correct them, for it is not beyond the bounds of reason that the present arrangements could be rewritten so as to eliminate some of the present anachronisms. Thus, I hope the committee, when it studies the provisions in this bill intended to continue temporarily coverage for fishermen will examine this question again, get to the bottom of it and come up with a solution better than the nebulous.