

Unemployment Insurance Act

I have attended meetings called by labour organizations in my own city, and this is one of the things that I find. Today we have people who have been unemployed for over a year. Once you have in this country two or three hundred thousand workers unemployed you are bound to have some of the workers unemployed for long periods. You are not going to have one lot of workers unemployed for a few months this winter and another different lot unemployed next winter. Seasonal workers are seasonal workers for years. They do nothing else but seasonal work. I am not saying that all the unemployment we have had during the last year and more is seasonal unemployment. In my own province there is considerable seasonal unemployment. But until last fall and winter we were taking that seasonal unemployment pretty well in our stride because the workers had sufficient to carry them over from one season to the next. Where they did not have that, the unemployment insurance helped. But we should remember that unemployment insurance is not a cure for unemployment.

I was in the house when the Unemployment Insurance Act was passed in 1940 and it was clearly understood that its purpose was to carry a person from the time he left one job until he got another one. Because of that, the weekly insurance payments provided were very small. You cannot expect anyone with a family in this time of high prices even to attempt to live on the amount provided by unemployment insurance, even at the higher levels of today.

While we welcome this—it is needed and it will help in some cases—if it is all that the government has to offer for unemployment then the people of this country—I attended a meeting where a man was unemployed for 15 months—have very little to look forward to.

I understand that the province of British Columbia offered to go 50-50 with the federal government in providing for unemployed workers in that province and that offer was turned down. The result is that the city of Vancouver and the other municipalities and the province of British Columbia are providing on a 20-80 basis to people who are resident and have been resident in the various municipalities. But unfortunately, in my province, and particularly in the coast section of the province, we get every winter a large number of people who come to the province because of a somewhat better climate and who add to the unemployed. It seems to me that when the federal government amended the British North America Act in

[Mr. MacInnis.]

1940 to enable it to enact unemployment insurance it assumed responsibility for all unemployment.

It appears now as if the government is running away from that position; it is not meeting its responsibilities. I suggest to them that we should not today, after so many years of prosperity, prosperity for which the government took credit—I shall have something more to say about that at a later time—accept that as a reason why more should not be done to relieve the unemployment situation than seems to be proposed in this measure.

Mr. Johnston (Bow River): Mr. Chairman, I should like to say a few words on this subject. I think we all agree that the government should have brought down legislation such as this long ago, but nevertheless I think we are all agreed that it will be welcome to the workingmen to have some form of relief coming through. The other day I was reading a brief which had been presented to the government in November by the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. In referring to this particular subject they mention the very things which the government is now bringing forward in this amendment. They say:

That supplementary benefits be increased and the period in which they are payable be extended.

Then the next submission along this line was:

That supplementary benefits be paid to those who have exhausted their regular benefits, and in the prairie region this to continue until May 1.

I am not sure whether that had any bearing on the government's decision to amend this legislation at this time, but certainly that was foremost in the thoughts of the trade union people when they presented their briefs to the government. It has been said here, and rightly so, that members of all parties in this house, even some members on the government side, have brought this matter to the attention of the government on other occasions. We recognize that while this measure is going to be of assistance to people who are going to receive these benefits it will not be a cure-all by any means.

I do not think a year has passed, particularly during the last three or four years, during which the attention of the government has not been brought most strongly to this particular matter. It has been pointed out to the government that the unemployment problem was a continually increasing one and that unless we took some definite action in regard to the policies which are being put forth to solve this problem it would continue to get worse. That is what has happened.