

*Labour*

Again and again the answer came back to us that the Government was in the final process of coming to an agreement with the provinces. It was in the final process of doing so in 1986. It was still in the final process of doing so at the beginning of 1987. As we came close to the end of 1987, it was still in the process of coming to agreement on this plan.

Finally, we came to 1988 and our questions started to become somewhat more strident and somewhat more emotional. By that stage the LAB Program itself had run out, and it was not possible for any worker across the country, regardless of the sector of the economy within which that worker had been employed, for him or her to get access to adjustment benefits. Despite the fact that LAB had run out, we still heard precisely the same answer.

I am pleased to tell the Hon. Member that we are at the final stages of negotiation. Finally, we have the Bill in front of us, and still the Government is in the final stages of negotiation with two of the provinces. This demonstrates to me that there has not been a sense of urgency and deep human concern about this problem.

There are many of us who represent communities in which this issue is not some sort of abstraction, but a very cruel reality. Individuals came to our offices and met with us in large meetings and, in a number of cases, those individuals also met with representatives from the Ministry of Labour. They pushed very hard for something to take place. Yet again and again they had to be told that we had done everything that we could to get this legislation put before the House, and it still had not appeared.

In fact, it took the emergence of a pre-election situation for the Government to come to an agreement with the Province of Quebec, and on the basis of that agreement announced that this program was finally going to go into effect. In fact, it is not going into effect across the country because agreement has not yet been reached with the Provinces of Ontario or British Columbia. I suspect that those two provinces, together with the Province of Quebec, experience the bulk of these lay-offs.

I do not want to go on castigating the Government for neglect, because it has finally brought a Bill before us. However, the point is that this Bill which it is before us today, when negotiations are still incomplete, could have been brought before us two years ago when negotiations

were still incomplete. At that stage, it would have done two things.

First, it would have applied pressure on the provinces to get agreements established with the federal Government. Second, it would have told workers throughout the country that something was going to take place very quickly. There is simply no question that, when one talks to older workers in my constituency and, I am sure, in constituencies throughout the country, that we are talking about a very serious structural problem which needs a response of urgent concern from the Government. It is simply much more difficult for older workers to make the transition to new employment. It is much more difficult for an older worker to persuade a company to let him or her into that pension plan when it is built on the basis of someone building up 30 years of seniority. It is much more difficult to persuade a company that, if training or special skills are required, once those skills are learned the five or six years remaining before retirement will be as valuable to that company as the time it takes for a 20 or 25 year old who comes into the company to build up those specialized skills and work for another 30 to 35 years.

• (1750)

There are two other points about this Bill that concern me greatly, as I think back to what the Government kept telling us in the last Parliament. First, the Government said it was absolutely crucial to have a system to help all older workers and not only those in specific industries, as was the case with Labour Adjustment Benefits Program. That was the Government's reason for shifting to this new approach. Yet this Bill sets up some quite arbitrary criteria. At this stage we do not even know what will be the regulations setting out these criteria, but they will require that the older worker who is helped be subject to a major lay-off, be in an area where there is a great deal of unemployment, and in a community where it is hard to shift to another job. That does not meet the commitment the Government made to see that all older workers would have access to this program.

It does not make any difference to an older worker who is facing transitional problems whether he was one of 150 workers coming from Champion Spark Plug or one of three workers coming from a small plant in Essex in my riding. He or she will still face precisely the same difficulty and precisely the same problems. I cannot, for the life of me, see the logic of the differentiation being set up in this Bill whereby the Government will help some older workers and will not help others. When this Bill goes to committee I very much hope that when we