

*Government Orders*

Yes, I use the word "dream". I am proud to be a member of a team that dares to dream, one that has such faith in our capacity as individuals and our capacity as a nation.

In the Liberal Party the vision was set out in what we called "Creating Opportunity: The Liberal Plan for Canada". In that document the government reinforced and spoke about the social fabric of the country. We promised to strengthen our employment equity legislation to ensure that we meet a very simple but profound commitment. That commitment springs from the belief that everyone in Canada is entitled to equality.

I remind members that the red book speaks of a future where all Canadians, regardless of gender, race, or physical and intellectual attributes, enjoy a standard of living and quality of life equal to those of other Canadians. With this legislation we are moving forward and ensuring that that future will become a reality.

I want to talk about Bill C-64 in terms of the strength we hope this will build in our society, in our communities, and among us. It is capitalizing on the diversity. It is about creating jobs and growth. It is about removing barriers to full employment. The modifications of the act are designed to streamline and strengthen its existing provisions to ensure that the philosophy behind employment equity becomes the everyday practice in the federally regulated workplace.

This constructive piece of legislation builds on the significant progress we have achieved since the Employment Equity Act was introduced in 1986. I remind the House that Canadian banks, airlines, broadcasters, some of the largest and most visible companies in the country, have been implementing employment equity programs for a decade. They have recognized that without such plans their businesses would become less and less representative of the clients they serve, a point which must not be lost on us as government.

As a result of the federal policy and the dedication of business to implement it, the numbers of designated groups have risen, without backlash but with plenty of benefits to our society. Bill C-64 is a continuation of our efforts to create real equality of opportunity in the federally regulated workplace. It goes further than our existing legislation by expanding the act's coverage and clarifying what employment equity will and will not do.

This legislation will help explode the many myths we hear coming from across the way in this House. These folks have circulated many of those myths: employment equity challenges workplace norms that reinforce existing patterns of power. This can be threatening to people who are satisfied with the status quo. They do not understand the need to accommodate differences because they are satisfied with the way things are.

• (1325)

The so-called playing field is already tipped in favour of those for whom it was constructed, so it is not surprising that

there are attempts to find reasons to justify resistance to more inclusive employment policies and practices.

We have heard the myths coming from the other side of the House. We want to affirm that employment equity, with its emphasis on fairness toward all Canadians, shatters all those unfounded assumptions.

The legislation requires only that employers consider all qualified candidates, I underline qualified, when seeking new employees or choosing among workers for promotions. The act does not allow quotas, and it certainly has no mandatory preferences when employers choose new workers or consider their existing employees for promotions. Somehow those two concepts, the qualified candidates and no mandatory preferences, seem to be lost on the opposition.

This bill is not about preferential treatment; it is about equal treatment. If it is given a chance to work, everybody will benefit. The legislation is meant as an unobtrusive human resource management tool that would educate and assist employers as they create more equitable workforces. Would that we could do this in the House.

The whole point of this bill is to enhance this country's economic performance through the removal of barriers that prevent members of the designated groups from contributing to the workplace. It is as much about economics as it is about justice. Clearly it is about both. We want to achieve a better balance, one that assures fairness and dignity for disadvantaged Canadians and works to our country's social and economic advantage.

We are not interested in compiling statistics. The act is not about counting numbers or instituting reams of new regulations. We are talking about Canadian people, work ready individuals anxious to demonstrate their abilities in a fair and welcoming environment, who must be given that choice.

We need to rethink how we relate to one another as groups of people. That is exactly what our improved employment equity legislation asks us to do.

Bill C-64 asks Canadians to open their hearts and open their minds to the many advantages of workplace diversity. It asks that we put into practice the democratic principles we profess to believe in: fairness, access and equity for all, regardless of gender, race, disability, orientation. It insists that we live up to our moral and legal obligations by upholding the rights and freedoms enshrined in our Constitution.

Clearly employment equity is not an impediment to business or an infringement on anyone's rights. It is a catalyst for improvement to the workplace and progress in our country. It is the foundation of Canada's future. More than just the stuff dreams are made of, this legislation can dramatically impact the standard of living and quality of life of disadvantaged Canadians, the millions of women, visible minorities, persons living