

Maternity Leave Act

at the earliest feasible opportunity the injustice of women facing possible loss of employment because of pregnancy. As one speaker stated, maternity is a perfectly natural and, indeed, in so far as the future of this country is concerned, desirable phenomenon.

• (5:50 p.m.)

Let no one make the erroneous assumption that the problem of maternity leave has been tucked away in some governmental cubbyhole. Hopefully, the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women will be tabled in the House next month. I think we will all welcome the tabling of that report by Mrs. Bird and the other commissioners. It may well be that this document will contain explicit recommendations not only for maternity leave but for other benefits associated with maternity leave. It may contain recommendations for new measures which would provide maternity leave as a matter of right for women employed in industries under federal jurisdiction. It can be argued that any action which the government may contemplate in the area of maternity leave should await that report. I think there is some logic in that position. As well, there may well be other recommendations contained in the Bird Commission Report which should be included in some wide-ranging, omnibus measure.

Let me reiterate one salient fact: there is strong and enthusiastic support on this side of the House for new measures which will be more favourable to the female labour force in this country. When this measure is brought forward by the government in whatever form it takes, it is encouraging to know the degree of support which exists in this House, not only on the part of government members but also on the part of the official opposition and members of the NDP.

In this regard I would remind hon. members that the proposed changes to the Unemployment Insurance Act will provide substantial new benefits for the women of this country. Under the act as it stands now, a sick person receives no benefit unless he or she becomes sick after entering the benefit structure. If pregnant, a woman is now generally disqualified for six weeks before and six weeks after the birth of her child. Personally, I find that kind of regulation indefensible. In the context of today's social situation, this denial of benefits to employees who become sick or pregnant is indefensible. Both sickness and pregnancy are natural phenomena.

I am sure that even opposition members will embrace with enthusiasm the proposal of the Minister of Labour that these anomalies be removed. The working women of Canada must be provided with benefits based upon a realistic appraisal of what their particular interruption of earnings means in the context of the work force of today. It has been pointed out by others who have discussed this point that when we adopt the concept of maternity leave we will not be wild-eyed revolutionaries in the process, that many other jurisdictions moved long ago to help women faced with this particular problem.

[Mr. Perrault.]

Under the proposed changes set forth in the unemployment insurance white paper, which goes hand in hand with the idea of maternity leave, if a woman has had 20 or more employment weeks in the previous 52 she will be entitled to UIC benefits nine weeks before and six weeks after her confinement, after a two-week waiting period. When we are thinking in terms of planning new legislation to bring into force a program of maternity leave, we should keep in mind these limits. There should be a standard relationship between UIC benefits and maternity leave benefits.

In the white paper entitled "Unemployment in the 70s" it is proposed that provision be made for the payment of benefits in the event of unemployment due to maternity. Financial benefits totalling two-thirds of earnings will be available, after a two-week waiting period, to women with 20 or more employment weeks in the previous 52 weeks and whose loss of income is due to pregnancy. Generally, the benefits will be available for a period of six weeks after confinement and nine weeks before. Similarly, there are many persuasive reasons why employers should be required in defined circumstances to reinstate them following leave and to protect their continuity of service for purposes of pensions and other employee benefits.

I agree with my colleague who spoke earlier that the limits should be defined and that rules and regulations should be provided. My colleague made a very valid point when he said that reference should also be made to the type of work which is available after maternity leave. If an employer proposes to provide employment after the leave has expired, but it is not the same type of employment, that is a very important factor. No one will dispute the fact that the period of eligibility for maternity leave should be long enough to embrace normal periods of probation, the period that a new employee must complete before achieving permanent status. These periods vary from employer to employer, but one to three months is common for non-office workers, and up to six months for office workers.

Surely, the period of eligibility should be long enough to counteract any tendency on the part of employers to introduce undesirable hiring practices such as requirement for a pregnancy test—this has been suggested as one of the stratagems which could conceivably be employed—which would suggest a minimum of at least nine months. Together with my colleagues on this side of the House I have no difficulty whatsoever in supporting the principle contained in this bill. It is a good principle. I am happy to see the official opposition joining the government in the desire to see reform in this area.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The hour for the consideration of private members' business having expired, I do now leave the chair to resume same at eight o'clock p.m.

At six o'clock the House took recess.