

Bill C-21 if fishermen's unemployment insurance benefits are not restored to where they are under the existing legislation.

I have said absolutely nothing about the other amendments. I simply want to repeat that I support the report of the committee and Senator Thériault's amendment, but, from a personal point of view, it seems to me that fishermen's unemployment insurance benefits are sufficiently crucial and are a sufficient test of principle that I think they absolutely must be put back in.

Senator Simard: But you might be prepared to negotiate on the other amendments in order to have the government accept Senator Thériault's amendment, which is of considerable interest to me as well?

Senator Kirby: I do not think I need to be in a position to comment on what changes might or might not be made. The point I am trying to stress—and I repeat it again—is that a very significant point of principle is at stake with fishermen's UI benefits. Frankly, I believe this is the most callous act I have seen introduced by a government, especially at a time when there are literally thousands and thousands of fishermen becoming unemployed!

When one realizes that the UI fund, based on forecasts by the bureaucrats themselves, will be in a deficit position of some \$2 billion to \$3 billion in two to three years time, it does not take much wisdom to realize that what will happen then is that the business community will start screaming that they cannot possibly compete with the United States effectively under free trade if those premiums are raised. Therefore, they will argue that UI costs to both employees and employers be reduced.

The first thing that will be cut—and I can tell you that I am saying this based on seeing 20 years of lobbying in this city, internally by bureaucrats and externally by the business community—the first thing to be cut when the UI fund gets into a deficit position, will be fishermen's unemployment insurance benefits. That is precisely why fishermen's UI should be paid for by all taxpayers. It is not an unemployment insurance program; it is an income support program. That program must be paid for by all taxpayers, and not left, frankly, to a situation in which the business community can lobby the government by saying, "We cannot be competitive. You cannot raise the UI premiums. You have to jettison fishermen's unemployment insurance benefits."

We simply cannot leave fishermen from the Atlantic provinces in that position. I for one will do everything I can in this chamber to prevent that from happening.

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

[Translation]

Hon. Arthur Tremblay: Honourable senators, may I ask a question on something that has been bothering me since yesterday? I would like to know what happened yesterday at the Committee report stage and what Senator Thériault's amendment meant.

Is it true that the Committee report tabled by Senator Hébert did not contain any amendment repealing Section 53

of Bill C-21, which Senator Thériault's amendment would actually repeal?

Senator Guay: That's right.

Senator Tremblay: I would like to know why, after all the efforts to propose amendments at the Committee report stage, this amendment considered significant by Senator Kirby, as demonstrated by his intervention, was not included in the Committee report. I would like to understand the procedure that was followed.

[English]

Senator Frith: A classic example of a rhetorical question.

Let's have the question! There is no answer. He was not looking for information. This is all explained in the transcript.

[Translation]

Senator Tremblay: Honourable senators, I am not sure I understand what the English word "rhetorical" means in French. Does it mean a gratuitous question or one we do not wish to answer?

Senator Thériault: Honourable senators, it is a very important matter and I did manage to convince my colleagues on the Committee to introduce an amendment.

[English]

Senator Kirby: Honourable senators, there is one comment worth making and that is that I think the brilliance of Senator Thériault's amendment is that it gives senators from the Atlantic region on both sides of this house an opportunity to vote separately on fishermen's unemployment insurance benefits. I would have thought that every member of this house, particularly every member from the Atlantic provinces, would, in fact, want to join in supporting the restoration of fishermen's unemployment insurance benefits. The amendment Senator Thériault has introduced gives senators from the Atlantic provinces that opportunity, which I am sure they were all looking forward to.

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (Leader of the Opposition): I think this is an important point, because the implication of Senator Tremblay's question is that the amendment put by Senator Thériault was an afterthought. It was not an afterthought. That amendment was always an important possibility.

We received the data that we had requested from the deputy minister on fishermen's benefits in the final moments of the committee. It was not possible to do any real analysis to understand the impact of the amendment at that point. It was easy enough to postpone the amendment until the report stage or, indeed, third reading.

So it was not an afterthought, which I think is the implication Senator Tremblay inadvertently made.