

the period does improve slightly the present system. That may be the only improvement in the bill, because, as I stressed to the House, it took two years of work, a team of civil servants and another minister to understand at last that this article terminating a benefit period after a four-week non-qualifying period should be modified. Then it was realized that this would adversely affect workers who seek employment or who could accept a job to such an extent that several people in my area called me when they could get a job without knowing how long it would last. I advised them to stop during the third week or else the civil servants of the Unemployment Insurance Commission would terminate their benefit period. The act is so silly that we were sometimes forced to make suggestions so that people would not be deprived of income, not knowing for sure whether they could work three, four or five weeks at a time, when the unemployment rate is high. This qualifying requirement from 10 to 14 weeks of employment is an improvement in comparison with the initial legislation. It is nonetheless a definite step backwards in comparison with the present system which provides for a universal qualifying period of eight weeks of insurable employment.

● (1140)

Precise details will have to be incorporated into the final draft of the legislation such as entitlement conditions of a worker going from a low to a high unemployment area. I remember asking this question at the Standing Committee on Manpower and Immigration and the senior official of the department took a lot of time to answer me. He made quite a phraseology. He spoke for 15 minutes and could not tell what would happen to an unemployed man who would leave Gaspésie with a certain amount of weeks to see his friends or his parents in Toronto and he could not tell whether that man would have a chance to find himself a job. But once there, he is still unemployed. Would he still be eligible for unemployment benefits? Therefore, given the circumstances, it is absolutely essential that this piece of legislation be clarified so that it may be implemented.

What seems particularly alarming in this new way of assessing entitlement to unemployment benefits is the relative nature of statistics. By raising the entitlement conditions, the government eliminates many unemployed, which artificially reduces the unemployment rate, but I insist on the fact that it is only an artificial reduction. The result of this measure will be a longer qualifying period, which will make entitlement to benefits more difficult for people out of work who are not on the Manpower centres records.

A lot of people as well as various groups concerned with this legislative measure have addressed a number of briefs to the Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration, for example groups of lawyers from the legal assistance services in the area of Sherbrooke, Montreal and particularly in the lower St. Lawrence area, from Rivière-du-Loup to the Gaspé peninsula. These people are constantly dealing with problems arising from this unduly complex legislation. Every Monday morning, at the commission's offices in Cabano and Rivière-du-Loup, I meet lawyers from the legal assistance

Employment and Immigration

offices in Cabano and Rivière-du-Loup who are there to defend unemployed people caught in a bind, and there are dozens of cases like that regularly. Why? Because we have a legislation which hardly applies at all. Agreed, the Unemployment Insurance Commission has paid out millions of dollars to unemployed people those last few years, there is no question about that, but why? Because there are thousands of unemployed people in Canada. But that is not a reason good enough to try and change the legislation to get rid of part of them, since they will still remain unemployed and have to resort to social assistance because they will have no other source of income. That is not the best way to run the affairs of the country in the interests of the workers in Canada. Most of them are willing to work and try to earn their living honourably. We must provide them with the chance to do so.

I would like to quote from the conclusion of a brief which has been prepared by representatives of the legal commission in my region. It says that finally, the unemployment insurance legislation was at the outset based on the principles of an insurance against a risk, namely the temporary and occasional loss of one's job. With the development of the scheme, and more particularly with the extension brought about in the legislation in 1971, the government has changed it into a social legislation for redistributing the income of workers favoured with full employment to workers living in high unemployment areas.

We find it unacceptable that the government decide to change the current system by reducing the coverage at a time when the number of claims has risen dramatically among workers. The government should have considered increasing revenues rather than reducing benefits. Further, a true economy-priming policy would have reduced the number of claimants and boosted revenues. Keeping this in mind, and despite a few minor improvements such as extended right of appeal, and even with the amendments brought forward by the minister on April 26 last, Bill C-27 is a step backward. There may have been abuses, but the proposed remedy is out of proportion. It affects mainly those workers who have the largest exposure to unemployment, those in high unemployment areas.

I have in my files hundreds of cases of all kinds. This morning I dictated no fewer than ten letters, all pertaining to unemployment problems.

They originate in a UIC office in my area, either Rivière-du-Loup or Lévis, and then go to the arbitration board and the Federal Court, always because of a badly drafted law. How can we then feel inclined to support such a legislation, when we know it will make things more difficult for the unemployed? We cannot. If I could cast 100 votes against it, I would.

Recently, the National Council of Welfare put out a brief concerning employment and poverty. I would like to quote from the last page of the brief, to give an idea of the interest taken by those people who follow the situation all over Canada. They know the problems. It is their job to take the public's opinion, to make surveys and try to make practical