

Unemployment Insurance Act

Mr. David Orlikow (Winnipeg North): Mr. Speaker, believing, as I do, that the House of Commons is a place where members should debate the issue which is before them, I wish to make a few comments about several of the speeches we have heard this afternoon and this evening.

The hon. member for York North (Mr. Gamble) who has just completed his speech wants the tax system changed so that those who already have most in this country would be able to keep more of the wealth they have. He proposes to do this by reducing their taxes. Does he not realize that the top fifth of income-earners in this country already get 42 per cent of the total gross national product while the bottom fifth gets less than 4 per cent? In other words, the bottom fifth have average incomes of less than one-tenth of the top fifth. What greater degree of inequality does the hon. member for York North want? Does he not realize that the share of the gross national product which goes to business and industry has risen steadily in the last three or four years while the share which goes to wages and salaries has gone down? Yet the hon. member comes here and complains that postal workers' wages have been increased too much. Of course, he does not say a thing about the fact that profits are virtually at an all-time high right now.

The hon. member for Bow River (Mr. Taylor), who spoke this afternoon, urged the government to get tough with people who abuse the unemployment insurance system. I am not going to defend anybody who abuses the unemployment insurance system, but I would be much more willing to listen to the hon. member for Bow River if occasionally he would get up here and talk about the fact that there are some doctors who abuse the medical insurance system and suggest that the government ought to go after them.

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I would be happy if the hon. member would rise in the House sometimes and talk about the fact that there is a number of large corporations in this country which have been prosecuted, charged, tried and convicted, not once but two or three times, because they have been involved in an illegal conspiracy to maintain prices at a fixed, too high level. We never hear a word about that from the hon. member for Bow River. I should like him to talk about that.

I find it somewhat puzzling that when the president of the Postal Workers' Union broke the law, it did not take very long for the government to charge and bring him to court and then to have him convicted and have him actually serve a sentence. There were some very big leaders of industry in Hamilton, however, who conspired to fix the price for dredging and who bilked the public of several million dollars. They had a long, long, trial which went on for several years, and they were found guilty. I wonder when, if ever, they will serve the sentence which the judge imposed on them. Some of us wonder at the way justice is done and at the equity which we have in our justice system. We do not hear the hon. member for Bow River talk about that.

I want to say a few words about the speech we heard from the hon. member for Lincoln (Mr. Mackasey). He was loud in his criticism of the Canadian Labour Congress, of its supposed silence on the question of unemployment insurance. I do not have to defend them; they can look after themselves. I have a pretty good idea, because I have spoken to some of their elected officials and to some of their research staff, of what they think of the present law which we are discussing, and of the whole system of unemployment insurance. The hon. member for Lincoln implied that the reason they were not talking very much about unemployment insurance was that their members are working and were guaranteed their jobs.

I wonder where the hon. member for Lincoln has been in the last year or so. Does he not know that there have been major lay-offs in the auto industry, rubber industry, the glass industry, the plastics industry, the forest products industry, and the construction industry? Does he not know that there are tens of thousands of workers in this country who have not been employed in the past, some of whom have never drawn one week of unemployment insurance benefits before 1979 and 1980, and who continue to be unemployed now? I think the hon. member knows that, and I think he was talking tongue in cheek when he made those comments.

I wonder whether he was not so vehement because he knew deep in his heart, but did not want to admit it publicly, that what the Liberals had been doing almost from the time that the major rewriting of the Unemployment Insurance Act took place under his direction when he was minister in 1971, has been to cut down that act step by step. Of course, the hon. member for Lincoln now is a Liberal member of Parliament and he cannot say that publicly about his own party, but that is what the government has been doing. So what does he do? He sets up a strawman which he can beat.

He blames the civil servants, the bureaucrats, and he implies that the reason the whole plan is in trouble is that the senior civil servants duped their political masters, the cabinet ministers, that they were wrong in the estimates that we would only have 4 per cent unemployment, on which figure the premium rates were set back in 1971. He implied that if only they had not made that mistake, to which, of course, they do not want to admit, and had their political masters, their cabinet ministers, been as bright as the hon. member for Lincoln, they would have seen the facts as they were and we would not be in the trouble in which we find ourselves. I do not believe that for a moment.

I believe that the cabinet ministers knew exactly what was happening and they were very happy to follow the advice of the senior civil servants which was that the premiums paid by both the employer and employee should be raised, as they have been steadily raised since 1971, because, for a number of years now, they have been in a mood of retrenchment and restraint, in a mood to show the public that they can control government expenditures. One of the best and easiest ways to control government expenditures closely is to stop paying as much unemployment insurance costs by the government as possible, and to shift the cost to the employees and employers in the