

I am a Canadian who has seen the American system. That system does not want pregnancy benefits. It does not believe in a variable entrance requirement for unemployment insurance. That system is, generally speaking, not as supportive of its female half. The American Constitution has not even recognized women's equality.

If I were running an American company which was in a sector predominantly employing women, and I saw that my Canadian counterpart had a chance to keep all his skilled labour on during pregnancy because the Government offered pregnancy benefits, I would go to my Government and say that the Canadian Government is offering pregnancy benefits and that it is an unfair subsidy; it is putting me at a disadvantage. The women in my company do not get paid when they leave for that reason and I often lose good labour and the possibility to compete as a result. This is possible because the two parties in this bad Mulroney-Reagan deal have not been able to come together and define specifically what constitutes a subsidy. Everything and anything is up for grabs, including medicare, pregnancy benefits, and child care benefits.

The Minister is shaking his head. I believe that is the reason he is bringing in a variable entrance requirement which will be good for only one year. He does not want to lock us into a long-term strategy which says that in various parts of Canada we can be unemployed for varying periods of time and still qualify for unemployment insurance. He wants to leave the door open to cave in to the American claim, which has already been made, that Canadian fishermen are unfairly subsidized because they get unemployment insurance benefits during the non-fishing season. Unfortunately, the Minister of State for Grains and Oilseeds (Mr. Mayer) does not understand the unemployment insurance system. If he did, he would know that a claim of unfair subsidy has already been laid by the Americans in this respect, and one way the Government will be able to cave in to the American demand is by abolishing—

Mr. Mayer: But it was not substantiated.

Ms. Copps: —the variable entrance requirements, which will then set a uniform policy across the country. That means that if you are living in Toronto or Corner Brook or Victoria, you will have to be unemployed for the same number of weeks to qualify for unemployment insurance. I am sorry he does not understand the system. If he did, he would realize that the reason the Government is bringing in this legislation for only one year is to keep its option open.

• (1650)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, this is why I am very glad we were able to convince the Government not to implement Mr. Forget's recommendations concerning unemployment insurance. For a while the Government did toy with the idea of doing away with what is called the variable entrance requirement.

Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971

I am glad the Government finally saw eye to eye with the Liberal Party which said that the legislation should contain provisions to account for different circumstances in different regions of the country. For instance, as a result of measures taken by this Government with respect to lumber, workers in northern Ontario or northern Quebec are now without jobs. And if the unemployment rate is higher in Timmins, Cochrane or Kaspuskasing, for example, these workers must have more ready access to unemployment insurance benefits than others in Toronto where the lower unemployment rate ranges from 4 to 5 per cent.

This principle, which aims at reducing to a certain extent the disparities between the regions, has always had the support of successive Liberal Governments. We all know that there are regional disparities and that unemployment is now very low in Southern Ontario. On the other hand, in Newfoundland, where unemployment is quite high, if you live in a town where unemployment has reached 13, 15 or 20 per cent, it is much better to have faster access to unemployment benefits than if you live in a town where unemployment is only 5, 6 or 7 per cent and where there are more job opportunities.

In rejecting the recommendations of Mr. Forget to make the system uniform and the same for everyone, which would disadvantage those who live far from the business centres where unemployment is low, why is the Government extending application of the Act by only one year? Why not ask for five years to reassure all the workers that the rules of the game will not change during the negotiation of the Mulroney-Reagan agreement? The reason why it is interesting to examine this Bill in the context of the Mulroney-Reagan agreement is that we already know what is going on, in spite of the protests of the Prime Minister. Not too many Canadians may have believed him, but he has stated both in the House and elsewhere that our social programs would never be touched.

Mr. Speaker, I challenge any Member of this House to show me what guarantees have been included in the text of the Agreement for our senior citizens or for unemployment insurance. These guarantees do not exist.

Actually, Canada and the United States could not agree on what is meant by a subsidy. As we know, fishermen have already been hit by a claim from the Americans indicating that unemployment insurance benefits to our fishermen were an unfair subsidy. That already has been going on. It is in all our newspapers. We know our fishermen are threatened by that claim from the Americans that unemployment insurance benefits to fishermen are an unfair subsidy.

The Canadian Government and the Americans could not agree on what constitutes a subsidy. In the matter for instance of maternity benefits to women, and as we know we have programs in Canada to help women so that they may have 60 per cent of their salary paid by the unemployment insurance program. Will the Americans claim, once the agreement is signed, because there is nothing written down to guarantee those programs to Canadians, will they claim before the