

*Unemployment Insurance Act*

sitting in his first court and will look favourably and leniently upon the proposals I intend to make.

• (3:30 p.m.)

Having listened to the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (Mr. Allmand), we know there is much scope for abuses of the benefits which can be derived from the Unemployment Insurance Act. However, as is the case in respect of most legislation I believe there are people who become expert at finding and taking advantage of loopholes. Therefore I hope that the mere fact that there are loopholes will not justify anyone taking a stand against this bill. I too welcome a measure which will put some teeth into the regulations so that the act may be administered properly either in Ottawa or in the field. I should like to repeat, however, that many of the persons who apply for these benefits are neither scholars nor college graduates and sometimes do make mistakes which are not intentional.

I should like to be assured that the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (Mr. Allmand) would not vote against this legislation because he lives in the affluent society of Montreal. I would hope that he would think of the fishermen in some areas of the country who practice a very dangerous trade and who live with uncertainty because they can neither see the crop grow nor see it deplete. The area in which they must search for their product is such that their trade is an uncertain one. They work as hard as many others who are employed in other industries and I believe should be rewarded for their efforts. I am sure the hon. member would agree that if these fishermen are able to build up sufficient benefits they deserve to draw from the fund.

The hon. member for Halifax (Mr. McCleave) has drawn our attention to many of the problems involved in the administration of the act. I will limit myself to a reference to one of the most important of these problems. I have in mind the closing down of unemployment insurance offices across the country. I have been assured that this was done after serious study and concern in respect of those who are involved either in paying contributions to or receiving benefits from the fund. However, it would seem to me that a great amount of poor judgment has been exercised in these deliberations. I believe that those who have made these decisions certainly have not been in contact with the persons who must do business with the unemployment insurance offices. I am sure

[Mr. Keays.]

the correspondence which has been received by members of parliament recently from their constituents establishes the fact that the act is not being administered as well as it was in the past before the closing down of these offices. The recent increase in unemployment may cause more problems in this regard in the future.

I should like to ask the minister to take another look at the situation which has arisen as a result of offices having been closed down across the country. I would hope he would do this in order to determine whether or not the decisions which have been taken were justified. There is always the danger, of course, that we are becoming too much involved in computerizing and centralizing the offices across the country. This no doubt is done for the purpose of bringing about efficiency. However, from the experience of the provincial governments and other agencies I am sure we realize that computer systems have not yet reached the stage where they are completely reliable, especially when it is important to make sure that those who need their unemployment insurance benefits on a certain date receive them on that date.

One of the greatest problems seems to be that we have lost contact with the people. As I said before, we must realize that we are dealing with all classes of people not all of whom are able to understand all the implications contained in this bill and in other legislation. The people who are entitled to these benefits should have offices close to them so they would be in a position to have a personal contact. I was very surprised to hear that the nearest unemployment insurance office to Whitehorse is 1,300 miles away at Prince George. When there are 20,000 people in the labour force in an area this would seem to be a rather long distance away for the nearest unemployment insurance office to be. It sometimes takes eight or ten days for a letter to go back and forth and sometimes four or five months before the benefits are received. It seems to me that in this instance the administration has gone a little too far.

In my region, which is a peninsula, two offices were closed down. The two most distant ones were closed down and the central one was retained. This has meant that the people must in some cases travel 250 miles in order to have personal contact with the office. Because of the mail situation during the past winter owing to storms and weather conditions generally the people in this area who are entitled to benefits sometimes have had to