

Maternity Benefits

Let me just say, Mr. Speaker, that the principle of this bill is worthy of support. This is something that needs to be done, and, hopefully, it is something the government should allow to be done, and done today.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Côté (Rimouski): Mr. Speaker, any legislation "to reduce the economic penalties suffered by women", as stated in the explanatory notes of Bill C-205, is quite laudable in my opinion.

It is a fact that the provisions of the unemployment insurance plan as a whole must be constantly reviewed in light of ever changing conditions and recent experience. As everyone is aware, because of past experiences, governments have always made in-depth studies of the basic principles of the unemployment insurance plan before making any important changes. The frequently long and complex process of reviewing plan objectives and operations to make it more flexible and to simplify it is always necessary. One of the general elements of such a review is the examination of all special conditions and benefits.

In the context of such a general review, the government could also look at the problems and the issues surrounding maternity benefits to determine whether they are sufficiently fair and flexible or to see how special benefits, including maternity benefits, function within the framework of the unemployment insurance plan.

Some of the issues dealt with in this bill will certainly be included in any eventual review of the unemployment insurance plan. I am talking about the restrictions concerning the eligibility of pregnant woman for ordinary benefits and of the period during which a pregnant woman can receive maternity benefits. These issues, including the so-called ten-week rule greatly concern the government.

I believe that the basic purpose of this bill is quite laudable. However, Mr. Speaker, I think that my male colleagues have not considered certain subtleties of the Unemployment Insurance Act and regulations. This act and these regulations constitute a series of provisions which are interdependent to a certain extent. Very often one cannot be amended without affecting the other.

For instance, Bill C-205 proposes that conditions for maternity benefits entitlement be the same as those for sickness benefits entitlement. More specifically, a woman would have to prove that, if it were not for her pregnancy, she would be available for work. The idea would be to assimilate maternity benefits with sickness benefits. I must confess, Mr. Speaker, that I find this idea totally unacceptable.

To suggest that maternity benefits should be ruled by the same conditions which apply to sickness benefits implies that pregnancy is a sickness. Which is clearly not the case, as hon. members of the fair sex will recognize readily.

The second point which I should like to raise is not so evident to the non-specialist because of its technical aspect, but it is not less important. Now, a pregnant woman must submit a medical certificate to prove her pregnancy. This certificate must show the expected date of her confinement. Under the current provisions, a woman may choose to begin collecting benefits ahead of the eight-week period before her expected date of delivery.

She does not have to prove she would be available for work during that eight-week period. This is a criterion that applies to anyone claiming sickness benefits. If a pregnant woman had to prove she was available for work, often she could not do so. That would reduce the quietude pregnant women now enjoy to prepare themselves for giving birth. By specifying the same criteria for both maternity and sickness benefits, this bill could complicate things uselessly.

I think that is neither fair nor reasonable. Why make it more difficult to prepare for the birth of a child, which is a privileged and important moment in the life of a woman and, I am convinced, critical for the health of the woman as well as that of the child. Current provisions on maternity benefits are flexible and take those factors in consideration. That is why they must be preserved.

But, Mr. Speaker, it should be understood here that I am not suggesting the eligibility criteria governing maternity benefits should not be reviewed or even amended. What I am saying, however, is that those provisions and others should first be considered more carefully so all other new provisions will be equitable.

Mr. Speaker, this bill touches sensitive and controversial issues, issues that have brought women to exert considerable pressure on the government so it would change what they perceived as inequalities in the current provisions on maternity benefits.

I sincerely hope, Mr. Speaker, this matter will be given all the necessary importance so our unemployment program will be amended so as to allow women to live their lives fully and according to the rights of every individual. So women should have the right to be on the labour market, the right also to stay at home during a pregnancy and to educate their children but at the same time they must have access to an unemployment insurance program that pays them just and fair benefits.

Mr. Speaker, society needs all its individuals but, without any pretention, I would dare say that women are indispensable because you must certainly know the proverb, and I do not know where it comes from, which says: Being unable to look after everything, God created woman."