

Unemployment Insurance Act

reconcile their career objectives with their parental responsibilities.

Mr. Speaker, I consider that all forms of discrimination towards older people must disappear. I am happy that this bill allows people who are 65 years of age or more to be treated as full citizens. Older people will be able to contribute to the unemployment insurance system and to take advantage of all its benefits. These new provisions which will cost \$40 million are not only in keeping with the Charter of Rights but they recognize the privilege of Canadian men and women who are 65 or more to retire later. We must recognize that senior citizens have the inalienable right to decide for themselves.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, the Bill has other provisions whose goal is to eliminate some unfair restrictions on eligibility to benefits during work action.

Presently, Mr. Speaker, the legislation does not allow the paying of benefits for sickness or maternity during work action. We think that this an inequitable and retrograde provision that this House would like to do away with.

It would have certainly been easier to leave things the way they were by simply bringing in some minor amendments for window dressing and thus being seen as doing much while doing very little actually.

Bill C-21 and the Labour Force Development Strategy are not just a masking exercise. They go straight to the source of the problem, that is to give Canada a skilled labour force capable of facing up to the challenges that the 21st century will bring.

Our goal is to preserve the important role of Unemployment Insurance as an income maintenance program, while eliminating elements that encourage inactivity, especially in areas where the economy is strong.

To respect regional differences, we have also taken into account regions like mine, Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, where the unemployment rate is high.

In addition to training programs, Mr. Speaker, these regions will get special assistance for community development as well as measures supporting local entrepreneurship.

As I said before, Mr. Speaker, all that has been done while taking into account the differences between Canadian regions, despite those who would like us to treat all parts of Canada as one and the same.

In brief, in regions where there are more available jobs, people will have to work a greater number of weeks to be eligible for benefits and their benefit period will be shorter. Conversely, in regions with high unemployment rates, workers won't be affected by those measures, Mr. Speaker.

As a Government, we fully recognize the vital role played by the unemployment insurance system as a social safety net and we have no intention to undermine it. On the contrary! However, we are aware that the present system has shortcomings and doesn't offer any alternative. Bill C-21 proposes alternatives, Mr. Speaker. The risk was high but my Government has made a commitment to improve the lot of the unemployed, not to please unions, employers or the electorate but to assume its responsibilities, and that is what we have done.

All the changes proposed in Bill C-21 have essentially been designed to make that system more efficient and equitable and to meet the needs of workers. Like any Government measure, Mr. Speaker, this Bill imposes restrictions and obligations. As legislators, we have to look beyond the selective disadvantages which so often arise from the measures that we are taking. We must look at the potential long-term advantages of these measures, certainly for the people concerned, but also for the collectivity as a whole.

M. Speaker, Bill C-21, an Act to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act, is a legislative measure which will be beneficial for workers as a whole. Once again, its purpose is to give additional tools and a hope for a better future to thousands of Canadians presently unemployed. Having valued for a long time leisure, physical fitness or consumption, the time has come to value work. That is what this Bill does.

For all those reasons, M. Speaker, I would urge my colleagues to support this Bill.