

Unemployment Insurance

[English]

The last change which is included in Bill C-50 aims at maintaining the right to benefits for those claimants whose separation payments have delayed the start of a claim for UI. Under the present regulations, separation payments can delay the start of a claim and can, in certain cases, reduce the number of insurable weeks that CEIC counts to establish a claim for benefits.

The passage of Bill C-50 will allow the qualifying period or the benefit period to be extended by the same number of weeks represented by the separation payment up to a maximum of 104 weeks. This will ensure that most people do not lose the protection of the UI Program.

[Translation]

In my judgment, Madam Speaker, Bill C-50 deserves the consideration of all Hon. Members. The proposed measures will have a direct impact on a good many Canadians. These amendments show that the Government is intent on treating all workers with fairness.

Bill C-50 must be adopted as soon as possible. The sooner the House supports this measure, the sooner the Employment and Immigration Commission will be in a position to make payments to all those who are covered under these legislative provisions.

[English]

Hon. Warren Allmand (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine East): Madam Speaker, the Minister did not have very much to say about this Bill and with good reason. There is not very much good to be said about it. This Bill should not have been necessary in the first place and it was only required because last year before January 5, 1986, the Government decided, cruelly and unfairly, to cut the unemployment insurance benefits of thousands and thousands of pre-retired pensioners. So the Minister comes to the House today with the Bill and does not have very much to say because there is not much good to be said for it.

● (1120)

At least the Government has finally put Bill C-50 before this House for debate. As you know, the Bill was tabled for consideration in Parliament on April 1 of this year but was not called until today, more than two months later, even though the Government has the right to call Bills whenever it wishes. The Government has the power to set the business of the House. If it had placed a high priority on this matter it could have been called immediately after April 1. That was not done. As a matter of fact, we only heard from the Minister and the Deputy House Leader a couple of weeks ago when they approached us in order to deal with the Bill quickly in one day after delaying it since April 1.

What is Bill C-50 all about? I think it is important to repeat the story. On January 5, 1986, the Government cut unemployment insurance benefits of all those who were forced with little choice into early retirement and reduced pensions. Some of

those people were military personnel who are required to retire in their 40s. Many others are in their early 50s with homes to maintain and children in university. While these individuals have pre-retirement pensions, many want and need to work. As required by the Unemployment Insurance Act they are ready and willing to work, otherwise they would not be eligible.

Here we have approximately 50,000 Canadians who faithfully paid their unemployment insurance contributions for years and were laid off before their official retirement age. They still want to work but they have unfairly and retroactively had their benefits cut. In the middle of the game the rules were changed. Many of these people accepted a reduced early retirement pension with the understanding that they would receive unemployment insurance until they found a new job, or for at least a year. Others counted on it to support themselves and their families until they qualified for Old Age Security at age 65.

Some employers used this system, smaller pre-retirement pensions combined with unemployment insurance, to ease older workers out in order to hire younger workers in their place. Because of the Government's action this is not possible. The Government expresses great concern about youth unemployment but its actions are a disincentive to bringing in young people to replace those older pre-retirees.

These cuts in unemployment insurance did not apply to those who took early retirement but received retirement income from stocks, bonds, registered retirement plans, rents or interests. In this way the measures are discriminatory. They were a cheap, cruel way of attempting to reduce the deficit on the backs of the unemployed.

The Government said to a group of pre-retired pensioners, "We are going to reduce your unemployment insurance because you have been laid off before age 65 and you are receiving a pre-retirement pension". However, others who may have taken early retirement in order to go to another job and are sustaining themselves not by a pre-retirement pension but through rents or interest from stocks or bonds, or an RRSP, are not touched in any way whatsoever. They still get their full unemployment insurance benefits.

We maintain that not only were these cuts in unemployment insurance against pre-retirement pensioners unfair, cruel and discriminatory, but also illegal. They were introduced by the Government by means of regulation, administrative action, not by a Bill in this House. We have argued that for a long time. We asked the Government to explain how it could take away benefits, reduce benefits provided for in the Unemployment Insurance Act, without amending the Act. As I said before, we had people who were obliged to pay contributions over the years, including employers, by virtue of the Act, and then the Government comes along in the dark of the night and introduces regulations to cut the benefits. That seems to me and many other learned lawyers to be illegal.