

gram. Unemployment insurance should be available to Canadians who are available for work. A person who is available to work, and chooses not to, should not be entitled to benefits. Unfortunately the vast majority of Canadians who are forced to collect do so through no fault of their own and would want nothing better than a job to go to in the morning. The past performance of the Liberal government has shown that it is becoming more and more difficult for Canadians to retain their jobs. This mismanagement of past Trudeau governments has discouraged growth in Canada.

In the last Parliament I had the opportunity to sit on the other side of the House with a government that saw that the backbone and the future of this country are with our small business community. If the climate is correctly set by the government, small business will flourish in this country, and fewer Canadians will be forced to collect unemployment insurance.

I would now like to point out some deficiencies in how the unemployment insurance program is operated at the present time. I am sure that many members in this House have had constituents who have received UIC benefits and then had to repay all, or a portion of the benefits they have received, back to the Unemployment Insurance Commission because of some error made by the commission. After receiving benefits for a number of weeks, the commission informs the recipient that he or she did not qualify for the benefits and that the money must be repaid. The average person who is collecting UIC is not in a position to repay the commission what he has already received and spent. Assuming errors will occur from time to time, perhaps some provisions could be written into the bill to protect the claimant from repaying when an overpayment has been made, provided the claimant has brought forward all the relevant documents when the claim is being processed.

There have been numerous changes to the program over the years which have drastically changed the rules for qualification. Many of the errors in processing have been made because even employees of the commission are unsure of the regulations from one day to the next. A person who qualified for benefits last year may not qualify this year, but the commission employee may not know the change in regulations. Surely the UIC regulations could be simplified so that even employees of the commission could understand them.

Another deficiency in the UIC program is that in some instances the employee is discouraged from working. In my own riding of Malpeque last fall, a number of constituents who worked for 13 weeks were able to collect, and a number of constituents who worked at the same location and for the same employer were kept on for an additional two weeks for a total of 15 and found that when they filed they were ineligible and would not be receiving any benefits at all. I find this totally unacceptable, that a person who works for 15 weeks cannot collect while a person who works for 13 for the same employer, doing the same job, can. There is something wrong with the system.

I would like to inform this House of the explanation I received from the local office of the Unemployment Insurance

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Commission in Prince Edward Island. The number of work weeks necessary before a person can file a claim is determined by the unemployment rate in the area the person makes the claim. Because it would be very difficult to determine the unemployment rate for any given day, the commission uses the unemployment rate for the area three months earlier than the time the person files his or her claim. If the unemployment is high, the number of work weeks necessary is lower than if the unemployment is low. What can happen is that unemployment rates change with the seasons.

• (1730)

The person who worked for 13 weeks in this case was judged at the end of August when the unemployment rate was high, and it was deemed that only 13 weeks work would be necessary in order to qualify for a claim. The person who worked 15 weeks, two weeks more than the person who worked 13, was judged in mid-September after the unemployment rate had been lowered. The result of all this was that this person had to have worked 16 weeks in order to qualify. This person received nothing. The person who had worked two weeks longer than an employee at the same place was a conscientious worker and worked two extra weeks. If he had been laid off with the others, he could have claimed and received benefits. Because this person worked the two extra weeks, he was penalized by the system.

It is extremely difficult to explain to this person the fairness of the unemployment insurance program. It is impossible to explain to that person that the system is fair, and I agree with that person that some changes have to be made. As one of Canada's 282 elected legislators, I feel that somehow we in the House have let that person down. Surely our purpose as members in this House is to draft legislation which is fair to all Canadians. Before the bill is passed I hope we will be able to say that it is a fair and just bill.

Mr. Fred McCain (Carleton-Charlotte): Mr. Speaker, the inequities which have been pointed out in the act as it has existed, and the eligibility or ineligibility of individuals to benefit from the intentions of the act as it now stands, are things which I hope the minister will take into very serious consideration. This bill has a multitude of impacts upon the various programs which are under the minister's direction, one of which is that the rate of employment may indicate to those who assign public moneys and make-work projects how much money should be spent in a particular constituency.

I want to draw to the minister's attention the fact that a constituency such as mine, which happens to be largely villages, rural, and small towns, is rated not by the actual employment within the constituency itself but is rated for allocation of funds for make-work programs by the impact of employment in the cities of Fredericton and Saint John. There have been times in the last ten years when the city of Saint John has been considered to be almost overemployed. As a result of the statistics emanating from Saint John, the constituency of Carleton-Charlotte, which is next door on the west, has been denied the proper number of make-work programs