

*Employment and Immigration*

Realizing now that clauses 29 and 30 should be reviewed and amended, I consider this amendment should be supported and I will briefly state why it should be done.

To require that a claimant should have worked at least 12 weeks to be entitled to unemployment benefits is to lay a direct charge against the unemployed, leading us to believe that they are responsible for their own predicament. This new clause to the legislation proposed by the government directly affects the poorer workers since most workers who qualify with a minimum number of insurable weeks of employment are the following: the older workers, the less educated who keep their jobs for a shorter period, because available jobs are often for a short period. Students who do not wish to pursue their education and who, as a first experience, choose to work in the summer, find themselves unqualified for benefits due to this new provision, and so do the workers who pick fruit, vegetables or tobacco in various provinces of Canada.

This provision does not take any account of modern requirements in terms of personnel hiring in private, public or near public enterprises. More and more frequently, a business will need skilled workers for a short period of time. These skilled workers are generally hired for a specific type of work of short duration. The bill under consideration provides an increase from eight to twelve weeks of insurable employment to qualify for benefits. The government and its supporters want to make us believe that the majority of unemployed who qualify with a minimum of eight weeks of insurable employment are chronic unemployed.

It is obvious that with the provisions of this bill and many others, the government intends to make a viable enterprise with an insurance that eliminates factors involving the greatest insurance risks. A social legislation, such as the one which deals with unemployment insurance, should not be administered with the same standards which apply to private enterprise, especially when workers are footing the bill.

Over the first few years after its adoption, the Unemployment Insurance Act was in line with the economic requirements of the period. In spite of occasional tensions, the economy started to recover strongly in the post war period, and over the first few years of operation, the unemployment insurance scheme came out with a surplus. Through its 1971 amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act, the government has considerably strayed from the basic principles of a truly social legislation, the purpose of which was mainly to redistribute incomes. By setting the eligibility minimum requirements at eight weeks of insurable employment, without taking either regions or type of employment into consideration, the government should have foreseen that the workers of richer areas would pay for workers of not so rich areas where the rate of unemployment is very high, due to seasonal unemployment. Over the past couple of years, however, the government has been compelled to supplement heavily the unemployment insurance fund. As a matter of fact, a high rate of employment and a dramatic reduction in the number of available jobs have considerably increased the deficit of the unemployment insurance fund.

[Mr. Dionne (Kamouraska).]

Seasonal unemployment in some areas of Quebec such as the Lower St. Lawrence and the Gaspé peninsula rose slightly because of the lack of significant investments which could have reduced the unemployment rate by creating new jobs. Each winter, we experience a period of chronic unemployment and there are practically no jobs available for workers. In spite of this fact, the Unemployment Insurance Commission keeps disqualifying claimants who are not actively seeking jobs. This is nonsense, but unfortunately such are the results of this inadequate legislation.

This situation further deteriorated to the extent that in February 1977, there were 932,000 unemployed, according to Statistics Canada, an unemployment rate of 9.1 per cent which is a precedent in Canada since Statistics Canada started to compile data. Unemployment has so increased, both in scope and frequency that it has now become impossible to consider it as a risk in terms of an insurance. The unemployment problem is no longer a probability, but a cyclic and permanent reality. With this in mind, the whole philosophy that prevailed when the unemployment insurance plan was set up should be reconsidered and brought in line with the 1977 new conditions of a recessionary economy.

In adopting Bill C-69 in December, 1975, the government excluded claimants 65 years of age or over and repealed the section dealing with increased rate for breadwinners. Bill C-27 follows the same path in that it aims at disqualifying claimants who have worked 8 to 11 weeks while reducing the benefit period for all categories of workers. The objective of this bill is to save about \$275 million, so that all claims can be paid out of the Unemployment Insurance fund without direct government intervention.

However, it is easy to understand that the real cause for unemployment is not the excessively large number of unemployed people who are entitled to benefits, but rather an oversupply of workers in an ailing economy. A jobless worker should not be considered as a lazy man but rather as a victim of present economic fluctuations. So, we must reorganize that sad system, that topsy-turvydom, and enable everyone who is willing to earn a living honourably to offer his services to employers capable of giving them jobs. There are so many things to be done in Canada! Generally, Bill C-27, even amended, clearly represents a step backwards as compared with the present act. Instead of improving it, every decision being taken is such as to make things tougher for the unemployed. That legislation comes at the wrong time since all government studies foresee an increase in unemployment.

Just about all the studies made by civil servants, at top and lower echelons, forecast higher rates of unemployment in coming months and years. So, in view of that, the Minister of Manpower and Immigration (Mr. Cullen), advised by officials of the government, decided to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act and cancel the right of thousands of people to unemployment insurance benefits. To my mind, that is the wrong approach. Allow me to point out, in passing,—yes, I do want to point it out—that doing away with the rule on four consecutive weeks without benefits susceptible of interrupting