Bill C-113 certainly does not fit the bill. The minister has admitted that this bill is only tinkering and that amateurism shows. Bill C-113 does not address the problems of the 1.5 million unemployed Canadians. It does not address the sad state of the 2.2 million Canadians on welfare. It does not address the skills shortage that keeps so many Canadians from being able to fill the hundreds of thousands of good jobs available in this country.

I said earlier that among the three million new UI claims that were filed in 1991, 2,350,000 were filed by people who did not quit their jobs. Instead of voluntary quitters, the minister should focus on these people. Instead of cutting benefits, the government should be helping Canadians get back to work.

As I have said before, for each one percentage point drop in the unemployment rate, the UI fund deficit drops by close to $2 billion. If the government would attack unemployment as single-mindedly as it fought inflation and managed to get the unemployment rate to the 1990 level of 8.1 per cent, it would cut $4 billion from the UI fund deficit. The government has consistently shown that it is unwilling to take on the problem of unemployment. It is for that reason that we now find ourselves with a $4.7 billion deficit in the fund.

In closing I would like to underline a few important points regarding this piece of legislation. Yesterday the member for Athabasca got up and addressed the House in the debate during report stage on this bill. The member spoke a lot about fairness and I agree with him that the question of fairness plays a very large role in this debate.

Although I look at it from the opposite perspective, the changes to the UI act contained in Bill C-113 are unfair. Of course many things in life are unfair and we have to adapt as best we can but I think it is fundamentally wrong for a government to introduce legislation that it knows will hurt people.

The minister says that the bill is necessary in order to stop the abuse of the system. I have already indicated that the so-called abuse by voluntary quitters is relatively minor but something that is equally important to remember is that safeguards already exist to limit the number of free-loaders who abuse the system.

The minister may enjoy talking about all the UI free-loaders enjoying Florida. In reality a person must be available for work in order to collect UI. You cannot just sit around at home watching TV all day if there is work available. That is a myth.

• (1635)

More important, there now exists a penalty period of seven to twelve weeks which officers who handle UI claims can give to people who either quit without just cause or are fired for misconduct. The legislative committee on Bill C-113 was told that the average penalty is 8.5 weeks. The EIC official said and I quote: "A very small percentage get the full 12 weeks". It is clear that abuse is not really the problem. What does that mean? If voluntary quitters were the problem, as the minister suggests they are, would not more people get the full 12-week penalty? Of course they would.

I asked the EIC official why go to a total exclusion, as in Bill C-113, if the full 12-week penalty is seldom given? Her answer was: "The decision was made on the basis of financial reasons". It was not abuse, it was merely a political choice that this government made. That is heartless. The government needs to save money, so instead of cancelling or scaling back a $5.8 billion helicopter package it is going to exclude needy people from the UI system.

An hon. member: Well said.

Mr. Bevilacqua: Canadians will not forget such inequities. A solid majority oppose the changes in Bill C-113 because they understand that the bill will affect everyone. The anger and the bitterness that has resulted from this bill are sad testimony to this government's ability in the dying days of its mandate. At a time when everyone, business, labour, government and individual Canadians, should be working together to design a new society, the government is pitting Canadians against each other in a new class struggle. Canadians deserve better.

The government owes it to the people to withdraw this bill and go back to the drawing board. If we need UI reform then let the government offer Canadians an honest reform package. I know, and deep down everyone here knows, that Bill C-113 will do much more harm than good. For this reason, and for the reasons I have outlined today, I strongly and sincerely hope that all members will defeat this bill.