

there. Of course, it is a great canard that the majority of people on welfare rip off the system. They do not. If the government is serious about having honesty and integrity in the system, there are better ways to do it than to try to gut the system itself.

In answer to the hon. member's question, the municipalities will have much more difficulty in providing welfare payments to people who have run out of unemployment insurance. They will have much more expense in caring for people who are suffering from depression, attempted suicides and all the rest that goes with that kind of Tory government.

Hon. Herb Gray (Windsor West): Mr. Speaker, I feel that only a short time is left in the debate on third reading of this bill, but I really must rise and state my strong opposition, and that of the people of my community, to what this bill intends to do, and that is to seriously damage and undermine our unemployment insurance system.

The government says that there has been ample time to debate this measure. The facts are quite to the contrary. There were only three days of debate on second reading. Second reading debate was cut off by government-imposed closure. The committee hearings lasted only four weeks. It is interesting that of the groups appearing before the committee 157 of 202 groups totally opposed Bill C-21. Report stage lasted only two days, and only two days have been allowed for third reading. This is again because of government-forced closure on the proceedings of the House with respect to Bill C-21.

If the government really believed that this bill was a good bill, if it really believed this bill was good for Canada, it would not have acted in this heartless and peremptory way to close off debate. The government is really trying to make it hard for Canadians to have their say through Parliament about just what this bill will do to them. The more Canadians look at this bill, the more it is clear why so many of them think that it is wrong our country.

What does this bill do? Basically, it forces working men and women in this country to pay more for unemployment insurance, but at the same time to get less. The bill lengthens waiting periods, it cuts benefit periods, and because the government contribution is going to be

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withdrawn, it will mean that workers and employers for that matter are going to pay higher premiums.

Why is the government operating in this way? It may be that the government has the idea that people on unemployment insurance are not really in trouble, and that if they really tried harder they could find jobs. The facts I think are quite the opposite. The experience in my own community, and the experience across Canada, is that people are on unemployment insurance because they do not have any meaningful alternative. If the jobs were there, they would be glad to go to work to support themselves and their families.

There might be another explanation, and that is linked with the government's free trade agreement with the United States. It is very interesting how this measure would bring our unemployment insurance system closer to that which is in existence in so many parts of the United States. The government talked about harmonization, the government talked about a level playing field, but I do not think Canadians expected or intended that this free trade agreement would result in pulling Canadian working men and women down to the lowest common denominator, down to the lowest level of benefit that is found in a number of the American states.

The government may well be trying to head off in this measure what could be challenges through the U.S. Trade Commission, what could well be very tough negotiations under the subsidy provisions of the free trade agreement which remain to be discussed. Surely this government should not be giving in before the battle has even started. This government should be willing to stand up for basic social programs in this country. In spite of American pressure it should be willing to stand up for the meaningful parts of the social contract, the fabric of this country.

What will be the result of this measure going into law? If we look at my own community, we will see that large numbers of people, perhaps thousands, will not have the protection they need when the key industry, the auto industry, in my community of Windsor goes into what is bound to be some sort of cyclical decline. The auto industry has been doing rather well for the past several years, but there are already signs of a downturn in that industry and this has been the experience over the years. There are periods of prosperity, of upward movement in the industry with higher or at least stable employment. This is followed by periods of downturn, of lower sales of