

Unemployment Insurance Act

on this fund just because they have paid into it.

When the bill was introduced I had intended not to support it until I received a commitment from the government that it would do something concrete to correct these abuses and bring the act completely up to date. This afternoon I was pleased to hear the minister say that some steps have already been taken to correct these abuses and that others are in the works. However, I would like to have more detail on these measures to correct the abuses, and I would like a definite commitment from the government that it will soon bring the act completely up to date. When the minister is summing up on second reading perhaps he will give us more detailed information on what the department is doing to correct the abuses, and let us know what other measures will be introduced soon.

Some hon. members have referred to the fact that certain economists say that unemployment insurance encourages unemployment. I think this is a false argument. I do not believe that the small benefits we give to our unemployed encourage unemployment among those who are healthy and able to work. The vast majority of Canadians want to work. They enjoy working and only fall back on unemployment insurance benefits when they are honestly unemployed.

Speaking of the two specific matters dealt with in this bill I wish to say there is no doubt, if unemployment insurance is a good thing, that the benefits must be reasonable and must be sufficient to maintain a man and his family when he is unemployed. The present rates were introduced several years ago when incomes, rents and the standard of living were much lower than they are today. All these things have gone up. Nobody denies that they have gone up in recent years, and we must increase the benefits to make the unemployment insurance program reasonable and workable.

With respect to the provision in the bill extending coverage upward to include some people in the higher income groups, some people in these groups argue that they are in areas of employment, are receiving incomes, and are at stages in their lives when they are most unlikely to be unemployed. All I can say is that the statistics show that this is not so. Many people in the groups covered by this bill have been let go at advanced stages in their lives, men in their forties and fifties who had supervisory positions or who worked in clerical positions. This has been due to

automation and technical innovation in Canada, factors which will progress more rapidly in the future. People in this category must also guard against the eventuality that they may become unemployed. It is not something we want but, just as we insure ourselves against fire, theft and automobile accidents, since statistics show that men in this category could be displaced by technological change and automation they should be included in this program in order to protect their incomes against unemployment.

During consideration of this bill to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act we must ask the question, how does unemployment insurance and a revision of unemployment insurance relate to the new concept of a guaranteed minimum income? Many people have suggested that there should be one comprehensive program to maintain incomes in the nation, to provide a minimum income to people who either cannot work or are unable to find work, to people who are blind, to the crippled and the elderly. There are a great many arguments in favour of this concept. I would hope the government will plan an over-all review of unemployment insurance and other social welfare programs. It seems to me that there might be very real benefit, and a saving through efficiency, if these programs were co-ordinated so that they would provide income to people who are honestly unemployed and honestly unable to work.

I conclude by saying that this measure is certainly needed. The rates of benefit must be brought up to date to correspond with today's cost of living. We must protect those people who are likely to be unemployed. I think it is worth while that we do so and that we pass this bill. However, I repeat that I want a statement from the minister when he closes the debate on second reading, giving a commitment that something will be done about the rampant abuses with regard to unemployment insurance which disturb many Canadians. If that is done this bill will be accepted by the Canadian people in good spirit and with good support.

Mr. J. R. Keays (Gaspé): Mr. Speaker, we welcome the amendments in this bill because, as has been mentioned previously, it is time they were made. We are also grateful that certain amendments will be made to the regulations in order to clarify some of the anomalies in the Unemployment Insurance Act. I hope that the minister who is piloting this bill through the house will be like a good judge