

There was a set of paragraphs in the discussion paper which addressed the issue raised by the hon. member opposite in the House today. There was an examination of the issue of part-time employment within the process. There was an examination—I think this would be a fundamental change in the use of these benefits, the money which exists in the unemployment insurance fund—of the development of sets of principles and conditions which might provide a more developmental, long-range view of the use of this fund. Perhaps more emphasis should be given to the utilization of the benefits to provide income support for people whose occupation has become obsolete and who, therefore, need more training, to use, perhaps, some of these benefits to provide income support and employment to people who engage in projects of benefit to their community.

Those are the kinds of ideas which we, as the government, wanted the people of Canada to examine with us before making a decision. I think, Mr. Speaker, it would be a mistake—if you were to rule that this bill is legal in the context of what members of Parliament can do—to pass a piece of legislation that is not in the context of our social services policy and in the entirety of our social insurance act.

Mr. Cyril Keeper (Winnipeg-St. James): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation because I think the principle involved in this bill is a very important and crucial one. As you stated before, Mr. Speaker, there was some question about the procedural correctness of this bill being a private member's bill. While I claim no knowledge of procedure, I must say that from a substantive point of view, from the point of view of social justice and public policy, this bill should not be a private member's bill but should be a government bill. If it were a government bill, of course, it would be simply a bill in which the Liberals were correcting mistakes which they themselves had made in the past as they changed colours and weaved from this side of the road to the other side.

Let me come to the substance of the bill. Clearly the unemployment insurance legislation at this point discriminates against women, particularly against women who work and raise children. This is a kind of discrimination which we must remove from legislation and from public policy. This has been clearly recognized as a matter of discrimination by the Human Rights Commission, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, and also it would be recognized as discrimination under the Canadian Bill of Rights.

● (1700)

In these times there is a lot of discussion about entrenching the Bill of Rights, about putting that in the constitution. Often when we talk about the constitution we talk about it in a very legalistic fashion. Considering this kind of legislation, and thinking about the constitutional discussions which are presently ongoing, makes me think a better way to talk about the constitution, other than in a legalistic fashion, is to look at our basic values, the basic objectives of society, and to bring the legal framework into line with them. If we allow this kind of

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discrimination to continue, then it does not matter what kind of legalistic framework we have for governing the country. What is important is how we govern it, and toward what end.

Discrimination against women cannot continue in our society if we are to have a just and equitable society. We should remind ourselves that probably the most important social movement in Canadian society is the women's movement for equality and justice. Certainly it is the movement which offers the greatest potential for over-all social change, and change for the better in our society.

I am reminded of a study which was recently released in Winnipeg. By the way, this study was funded by the Department of Regional Economic Expansion; it was done locally in that city. It related to poverty in the inner city. It clearly highlighted the fact that the most devastating and blatant poverty is suffered by women in the inner cities, more particularly women of native ancestries. By and large these women are single parents who need the most help and who, under the present Unemployment Insurance Act, are penalized and discriminated against when they attempt to work. It seems to me one way to save the public purse money is to have people working rather than on welfare. If there is any group that could save the public purse money by moving from welfare to work, it is single parents, yet we continue to discriminate against them and to penalize them in their efforts to be a part of the work force.

A further part of this bill which I find very puzzling is the so-called magic ten weeks because of the fact that it is based upon the assumption that we know when a child is to be born. I am a relatively recent parent, a father of two children, and certainly I had no way of knowing when those children were to arrive. Given the best medical advice and the fact that I attended pre-natal classes and was very intimately involved in the process of my children being born, I was totally surprised when my children eventually arrived. It is hard for me to know how a bureaucrat who is very far removed from this situation in any particular family can set a date on the arrival of a child. In other words, this magic ten weeks is in no way magical; it is absurd. Of course it is discriminatory and should be removed.

The other basic underlying philosophy behind the present unemployment insurance regulations is that the unemployed are to blame for being unemployed, that it is because of them we have high unemployment insurance costs. Simply that is not true; it is a myth. The ones who are to blame for very high unemployment and the related high costs, of course are those who are in charge of managing the economy. If we were to direct our attention to better management of the economy, rather than attempting to appear tough with regard to the users of unemployment insurance, then the cost of unemployment would be reduced and the wealth of the nation would be increased. Rather than simple legislation which appears to alleviate problems, we need better management of the economy, and we need a more just approach to the distribution of wealth.