

Unemployment Insurance Act

"fifty-one". The reason it is not in order, of course, is that it would involve payment of money out of the public treasury, and a private member cannot so move. It should be pointed out, as has been done by the hon. member for Hamilton West, that the possibility of an additional 15 weeks of supplementary benefits does not change the fact that the regular period of 51 weeks is now being reduced to 36 weeks. In spite of all the arguments the minister has made about other benefits being provided in the new act, we feel it is unfortunate and unfair that this benefit is being reduced.

As we pointed out in the committee, we did not like the statement the Minister of Labour made in the house on second reading, when he mentioned that people who exhausted this period of benefit might appropriately qualify for the kind of benefit which was discussed by the Prime Minister and the provincial premiers when they met here in April. We believe it is far better to cover unemployment under an insurance plan where the benefit is available as a matter of right than on any basis of relief because, after all, that is what the other plan involves.

It is a matter of only 15 weeks less, and it is true that the numbers who will suffer this loss are not great; but to the extent that a certain number of people are losing a certain period of time during which they could draw benefit under an insurance plan as of right, and are being left, if they are in need, to a relief plan, that is a backward step and we are sorry to see the government taking it.

It has been said in defence of this move that in too many cases people draw these benefits for the 51 weeks because they are older people who have retired from one industry or another, and it is frequently suggested they are not genuinely in the labour market. I am sure all of us have had contacts or experiences with these men. I have had contacts with a great many in this group, and I refer in particular to railroad workers. Many of us have contacts with men of that age who, after being compulsorily retired, try to get other employment.

As I am speaking I think of a friend of mine who worked most of his life as a pipefitter for the Canadian Pacific Railway. He was retired at the compulsory age. He drew his unemployment insurance for a period of time, but he was not satisfied to do that if it was possible to get other work. He tried to get other work, and did get work in the bindery department of a printing establishment. Having been a pipefitter all his life, naturally the kind of work he would do in

a bindery was not of a skilled nature. His job involved moving heavy stacks of paper around the plant. He was not long at the job until he was in hospital with a heart condition.

Call it a sob story if you like, but I could tell of others. I have in mind instances that come even closer to home than the one to which I have just referred, but I have cited it as proof of the fact that many of these older men who are compulsorily retired are genuinely in search of work if it can be found. These are some of the men who are going to be cut off from unemployment insurance benefit by this change. That is why we feel that it should be continued for the 51-week period. I am sorry to see that the Minister of National Health and Welfare is not in his seat, but—

Mr. Martin: Oh, I have crossed the floor to speak to an hon. member, and I am now sitting close to you.

Mr. Knowles: I am glad to see that he has come over to this side of the house, where he can absorb some good ideas. I trust that when we reach third reading, if indeed it has not been done before, as acting minister of labour he will agree with the suggestion that the benefit be continued on the 51-week basis.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Chairman, on a point of order, and because there is a permanent record of proceedings in the House of Commons, I would not want it to be thought that my present approximation to the hon. member indicates any approximation to his ideology.

Mr. Gregg: I had not intended to reply to the hon. member again, but he did give expression to two words which I cannot permit to go unnoticed. He did say that this was a backward step. Let me assure my hon. friend with the utmost seriousness that it is not intended to be a backward step, and that in fact it is not. Rather it is intended to make the Unemployment Insurance Act a more effective instrument in the social security fabric in Canada than it has been so far. We are not leaving the older people without any hope at all, and we are not doing anything that could become the cause of unusual hardship this year, next year, or the year after.

The hon. member for Hamilton West may say, "Well, you put that in, but you are not quite sure. You just want to have a trial run." I will agree that this is a cautious and conservative—with a small "c"—step; I will admit that at once. But it is a cautious and conservative step just to make sure that