

it, when we had a lengthening of the season governing unemployment insurance. The dates on which fishermen were allowed to apply for insurance were extended from December 1 backwards to November 1, and forward to May 15. Therefore, at that time the fishermen's UI period was substantially lengthened.

Other changes were made to the UI Act in 1980 to reflect the fact that by that time in a great many fishing communities around the Atlantic provinces, particularly in those communities which had small fish plants, both fishermen and their wives were working in the industry. The fishermen were working at sea, going out in traditional small boats, harvesting and catching the fish; their wives were working in the fish plants, doing the work that is required to process the fish from the time it is caught and sent on to market. Those changes that were made in 1980 were designed to recognize that, in fact, no longer would fishermen and their wives be looked at as a single family unit for purposes of UI but would, as are working spouses everywhere else in the country, be regarded as two separate employees, each entitled to his or her own benefits.

Honourable senators, with that background stretching back, as I have said, to the late 1950s, one looks again at the amendments put forward in Bill C-21 to the Unemployment Insurance Act as amendments designed, essentially, as the first step of a two-step process to remove the special benefits that fishermen get under unemployment insurance. And make no mistake about it: this is a deliberate, conscious act of this government. Let me tell you why I say that. If you look at the history of the internal debate in Ottawa with respect to fishermen's unemployment benefits and if you look at the representations which have historically been made to federal government after federal government for the last ten to fifteen years by the business world, what you find is an interesting theme. Inside Ottawa there is the bureaucracy, led largely by Treasury Board and the Department of Finance, arguing very strongly that fishermen's unemployment insurance benefits should be eliminated; that they are not unemployment insurance, and that they are an income support program and therefore should be eliminated. In fact, up until now the only reason why those benefits have continued, and why, as I have pointed out, in 1970, 1976 and 1980, those benefits were not only maintained but expanded, was that there was a significant amount of political will on the part of the ministers in power at that time, and on the part of their caucus and of the House of Commons.

Make no mistake about it, honourable senators: The business community, on the one hand, through all kinds of representations over the last 15 years, and the bureaucracy in its own way, on the other, have repeatedly made representations to the government of the day to stop giving special benefits to fishermen; they want the government to withdraw that support; to recognize that these are seasonal workers who should not be entitled to any more special benefits than any other worker, whether he is working in an auto plant in southern Ontario or in a mine in northern Ontario. The only thing that has stood between the abandonment of that pro-

gram, the complete collapse of it, has been the political will of ministers.

That is a very important point to understand when we consider the remarks made by Senator Simard yesterday. I must say I was rather surprised to hear him make this statement, and I quote from page 1233 of yesterday's *Debates of the Senate*:

I don't think that as long as we have senators and members of Parliament from the Maritimes . . . the government would pressure employers and employees who would refuse to pay for Maritime fishermen. I don't think there is any danger of that happening.

● (1520)

I think, in all fairness, that Senator Simard was expressing a view that would be strongly supported by members of his party in this chamber and elsewhere. Essentially, his view seems to be that we should say to the fishermen of the east coast, and, indeed, the fishermen of Quebec and the west coast, "Trust me, the cheque is in the mail." The difficulty I have with that view, in light of the way this government has repeatedly folded time after time under business pressure, is that it will not take very long before, once again, the government folds under pressure from the business community and, once again, we find ourselves in a situation where fishermen's benefits are not just in jeopardy but are being removed completely.

That, it seems to me, is the fundamental issue at stake with respect, in particular, to Senator Thériault's amendments and, in general, with respect to the unemployment insurance bill. It is simply one more step in this government's general policy of systematically, slowly, step by step, dismantling key portions of the social safety net of this country. The so-called claw-back provisions of Bill C-28 are another example of this government's attempt to systematically change the social safety net of the country, but I shall not go into that at the moment.

If as a Nova Scotian I have one responsibility in this chamber, it is to represent the people who can least fend for themselves. Surely there is no group in society in Canada at the present moment that is less able to look after itself than the fishermen of the Atlantic coast. One only needs to read the newspapers day after day to understand that there is massive disruption in the industry. For those of you who have not been down to the Atlantic coast, that disruption is not limited to three or four plants, such as those in Canso or St. John's that are getting all the press coverage. The fact of the matter is—and I know that senators from all parts of the Atlantic region will verify what I am about to say—that as you travel from one end of the Atlantic region to the other you will find small plants in which pockets of 5, 10, 15 and 20 people are being laid off because they are closing, because quotas are used up and the fishermen cannot fish.

For the government to take this point in time, when there is such enormous social pain in the region, to say to the people of the region—the fishermen, their wives and plant workers—"We are abandoning you. We will not support you. We will leave you to the mercy of business—and we know you trust