

Unemployment Insurance Act

economic and industrial environment of Canada goes through change.

In that respect I would like to report to Hon. Members of the House that we are continuing to review many of the essential ingredients of the Unemployment Insurance Act. We have submitted some of the critical questions, such as the nature of payments and contributions, the phases of benefits and other means of trying to develop a more efficient and effective system as well as a more equitable system, during this period of time. I certainly am one of those in this House who share the view that changes and reform to the system must be a matter of constant undertaking by Parliament.

I would like to suggest at this particular second reading of the Bill, that we limit our modifications and refinement to a couple of very critical areas, partly because of the demands of time and partly because this is not the time in which we should undertake a major restructuring of unemployment insurance. I feel we are certainly looking forward to a period of recovery in Canada, but at the same time there are many Canadians who are still unemployed and who still require the services of the unemployment insurance system. Now is not the time to start major reformulation and restructuring. It is under continual pressure. As a result we must ensure that any changes we make do not destabilize the system and make it unworkable during a time when it is providing such a major source of support and security for so many Canadians.

Therefore, the proposals we will be making today on second reading deal with essential and necessary changes to the Unemployment Insurance Act, as well as some major areas relating to an inequitable clause under the Act with respect to women and the family position in Canada. I hope that Hon. Members will limit themselves to those kinds of changes.

That does not mean to say, however, that we will stand still and not continue with modifications. We still have the opportunity to undertake a number of imaginative uses of unemployment insurance. I would like to point out to Hon. Members how in the past year and a half we have slowly, but very deliberately, started to reshape the direction of unemployment insurance towards an employment insurance program. This would be a program which would not only provide income security during a period of a loss of job, but it can also be used to help people keep their jobs as a system of providing a way of using those funds to provide job protection and security.

It is that area where, I believe, we have made some of our most important changes and progress during this past year. Let me point out, for example, Mr. Speaker, that we have successfully employed Section 38 of the Unemployment Insurance Act to help keep people working during a time of instability and have, therefore, provided employment for over 31,000 Canadians. They have been able to undertake very useful and effective work in fisheries, forestry and mining; moreover, it allows people to stay on the job and keep themselves at work rather than staying at home and going through the frustration and the anxiety of being idle. Therefore, I feel

Mr. McGrath: Mr. Speaker, I suggest that we get on with the Bill. In the interim, the House Leader for the NDP could confer with my House Leader and a representative of the Government and perhaps resolve the matter that way. In the meantime we are losing valuable time; we only have one day.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): The House has heard the proposal put forward by the Minister of Manpower and Immigration. Is it agreed?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): Agreed and so ordered.

Mr. Axworthy moved that Bill C-156, an Act to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971 (No. 3), be read the second time and, by unanimous consent, referred to a Committee of the Whole.

[Translation]

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am rising in the House to introduce Bill C-156, an Act to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971, for second reading. Before considering the proposed changes, I would like to deal briefly with the role of unemployment insurance as a system for providing income support and as a labour market adjustment mechanism.

[English]

I think it has been well understood by most Canadians during this very difficult period that the unemployment insurance system has made a remarkable contribution in maintaining a sense of security for many Canadians who were faced with the serious difficulty and tragedy of unemployment. It has also been able to maintain a very great degree of stability in our total social and economic system as a result. It has demonstrated its value as an important and significant framework of economic and social legislation during this very critical period of time.

• (1115)

I would like to point out to Hon. Members of the House that the unemployment insurance system has been one which has been constantly updated in order to be relevant and contemporary with changing economic conditions. I simply hearken back, in particular, to the major amendments which were made to the Bill in 1971 by one of my predecessors, the Hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr. Mackasey), who has unquestionably provided one of the most important contributions to expanding the application of universality to the unemployment insurance system, as well as introducing very many critical and important social clauses to that Bill, which allows Canadians during the 1980s who are faced with recession to be able to absorb the kinds of shocks and difficulties they have had to face.

We also recognize, Mr. Speaker, that it is very important to undertake a constant review and adaptation of the unemployment insurance system so that we can constantly have it evolve as a proper and effective governmental, legislative tool as the