

Supply

Cherishing those values as we do, it is little wonder we would support employment equity which is, after all, simply a tool for assuring fairness in daily life. That is what we seek to do in Bill C-64.

Why is the bill needed? While some progress has been made by the existing Employment Equity Act, recent statistics indicate that much remains to be done. 1993 actually saw the number of employees covered under the Employment Equity Act drop by 4.27 per cent. That is almost 26,000 people. Much of this was the result of the layoffs which flowed from the recent economic downturn from which we have just emerged. Sadly, members of the designated groups covered by Bill C-64 were often the hardest hit.

While the number of people in designated groups increased, fewer of them found themselves in the labour market. Among those who did, most did not see the wage gains and promotional opportunities enjoyed by other working Canadians.

Many women, aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities still find themselves on the bottom rung of the economic and social ladder. Of course this is not just their problem. Rather, it is a problem for all of us since restricting their participation in the economic life of our country also damages the competitiveness of Canadian business.

It is increasingly obvious that a diverse workforce benefits companies by providing them with improved access to a greater number of qualified people. Indeed many businesses now realize that recruiting, promoting and retraining people who are representative of the Canadian population helps them provide better and more responsive client service since diverse experience and perspectives are a bonus, not a burden.

How does this bill present a balanced approach? Contrary to what the hon. member and other members of his party might think, the bill before us is not some piece of wild-eyed radicalism totally divorced from the realities of economic life. Rather it is a moderate and thoughtful document which seeks to promote equal opportunity in the workplace without imposing an onerous regulatory environment on businesses that are already hard pressed in the increasingly competitive global marketplace.

This balanced approach can be seen in all of the amendments contained in the bill. For instance, while the act seeks to encourage employers to address under-representation by members of designated groups, it does not require them to hire unqualified people, create new positions, create undue hardship or contradict the merit principle.

Likewise, it does not impose a quota system as has occurred in other jurisdictions. While we have listened to representatives of designated groups who have called for an effective enforcement mechanism, we have also listened to business representatives

who have asked that we not bury them under a mass of new regulations and paper burden. We have developed a series of amendments which combine practicality with justice. As a result, we are all winners.

• (1620)

At the same time, many of the amendments contained in the bill represent little more than housekeeping. They will simply extend to the public sector those requirements which have already been placed on the private sector. This is only fair.

Finally, the act will broaden the mandate of the Canadian Human Rights Commission to allow it to conduct audits of public and private sector employers in order to verify and gain compliance with the act. Even here we are ensuring a balance with the establishment of the employment equity review tribunal.

Canadians are justly proud of the core values which are at the heart of our country. Central to our value system is a concern for ensuring equal opportunity and justice for all Canadians. The existing Employment Equity Act passed in 1986 has led to real progress in ensuring greater equality of employment. Still, much remains to be done. The act before us represents an important step forward in assuring that all Canadians can enjoy equal opportunity in employment and promotion. At the same time it seeks to provide a vital balance between idealism and economic reality.

The government's employment equity policies are not about intrusiveness, discrimination or adding to the cost burden to Canadian business as the hon. member's motion suggests. Rather they are about fairness, about the government's commitment to ensuring that every Canadian, regardless of gender, race or physical attributes has a chance to fulfil his or her potential, to get a rewarding job and to contribute to the social and economic well-being of Canada.

Employment equity is not an impediment to progress. It is a catalyst for progress in the workplace and a boost to the competitiveness of Canadian companies in an increasingly demanding global economy. Most of all, it is about putting into practice the values that make us Canadian: fairness, justice and equality for all. It is for this reason that I cannot support the motion, but I will be supporting the legislation before the House and would encourage all members to do likewise.

Mr. Chuck Strahl (Fraser Valley East, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, I have a couple of questions for the member.

Obviously there is no time to get into the whole bill but he mentioned that numerical targets were not quotas, that we were not to worry because this was not about quotas.

Lyn McLeod said in the leader's debate with Bob Rae in Ontario on May 18 that numerical goals are quotas, pure and simple. I would like to know whether he agrees with the Liberal