

Unemployment Insurance Act

this opportunity of thanking members of that committee for the confidence they showed in me by electing me as their chairman and also for their cooperation with the Chair during committee hearings.

Yesterday, the hon. member for St. John East (Mr. McGrath) made the following remarks which I quote as recorded on page 618 of Hansard:

You are supposed to be the impartial chairman of the committee.

I do not know whether he meant thereby that I am not impartial because if he did, I of course protest emphatically. And besides, if he means that because I am the chairman of a committee I am not entitled to speak on the subject before us, there I must tell him that I disagree because as a member of this House I have the right to express my opinion on any subject when I believe it is my duty to do so.

I should also like to take this opportunity to mention that during the debate on January 12 the hon. member for Peace River (Mr. Baldwin) expressed himself as follows:

• (2010)

The chairman of the standing committee admitted yesterday—he let it slip out—that there is a firm date, February 8, when the minister intends to bring the budget down.

It is absolutely not true that I said this, not only because I do not know myself for sure the date on which the budget will be brought down, but because I think even the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) does not know it. I cannot see why I have been made to say that the budget would be brought down on February 8.

The bill now before us is very important, and it is essential that all parties recognize its urgency, since the effect of the special warrants that were issued to authorize the payment of unemployment benefits to certain recipients will terminate February 7, which means that on that date the money provided for will run out and consequently it is imperative that Bill C-124 be passed by both Houses and given Royal Assent as soon as possible.

Being sure that all hon. members agree as to the importance of this bill, I hope we will waste no time in considering it.

The Minister of Manpower and Immigration (Mr. Andras) clearly showed the need to pass this bill and I do not intend of course to go over that again.

Let me add that it has not been proven that the aforesaid warrants were illegal, although the hon. member for Peace River attempted to prove it through an amendment and I quote:

—and, on the other hand, seeks to legalize and ratify the improper and illegal actions of the government in making advances in excess of the statutory limit.

I rather believe that our friends are trying to make of this bill a political question, to create a scandal where there is none and to prove that there is illegality. But to date nobody has proven that there has been any illegality, for instance in the way the special warrants were issued and in the way the Treasury Board behaved on that occasion.

This to me is a storm in a teacup and here again we have proof that opposition members were frustrated by

[Mr. Leblanc (Laurier).]

the voice of the people on October 30 and that they are trying, through every possible means, to secure the power that escaped them.

I believe they should accept, as we did and as the other parties did, that verdict from the people and accept their fate willingly.

This merely has to do, I believe, with technicalities when advances are mentioned instead of appropriations. Of course there are more than technicalities for there is a pretty clear-cut difference between advances and appropriations but there again, like good lawyers, there are many who attempt to interpret what happened to their best advantage but unfortunately, the people do not accept their arguments and those expecting to get unemployment insurance benefits are anxious for this bill to be passed, to be sure that they will get what they are entitled to from February 8 onwards.

Of course when one speaks of the gap between an \$800 million ceiling and a total amount of \$1,879 million, it means an enormous difference and the minister recognized there surely had been a mistake somewhere when the ceiling was set in the act. But I am positive that the minister is not responsible for such a situation and that the reasons then justifying the appropriation of \$800 million probably no longer exist. The \$800 million were exceeded mainly because of the benefits and the increase in administrative costs. The cost of benefits depends on the changes which have occurred from the time the white paper was tabled and the day the legislation was passed, on the extension of the benefit period, on rising wages and on the number of workers in Canada.

I do not think it is necessary, Mr. Speaker, to insist any longer on that point but if there had not been that ceiling clause the bill would have been passed just the same and today, evidently, we would not be talking about amending this section of the act.

Besides, it is not the sole section which is called in question again because Bill C-125 still aims at correcting certain effects of the original bill.

According to the speeches delivered here, the public think that funds are given to the government as a blank cheque, which is completely false because government funds are first examined by our watch-dog, the Auditor General, then by committees, more especially by the Committee of Public Accounts where all parties are represented; they are also submitted to a control by various departments which make sure that funds granted to the government will be spent according to proposed appropriations and the law.

Mr. Speaker, I think that some other members wish to speak, among whom the former minister, and I am sure that they will find stronger arguments than mine. This is why I will cut my comments short to recommend once again to the House the early passage of the bill, hoping that it will soon be deferred to the proper committee for a more thorough consideration.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): The hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander).

Mr. Guay (St. Boniface): Hear, hear!