

Unemployment Insurance Act

If Canadians seize this opportunity and take up this challenge, the result will be that all Canadians will share in a greater wealth and a stronger future.

Mrs. Shirley Maheu (Saint-Laurent): Mr. Speaker, I rise to debate the Bill before the House of Commons today. It is with great sorrow that I witness one of the cornerstones of Canada's social fabric dismantled, or should I say destroyed, by the Conservative Government. It is painfully clear that the purpose of Bill C-21 is to cut back radically on Canada's unemployment insurance system and, in effect, privatize our oldest social program which has served Canadians well since 1940.

One must not forget that the UI system was brought into being as a result of the devastating effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s on our society, to ensure that no Canadian would have to suffer such hardship ever again.

It is because of this compassion toward the human condition that Prime Minister Mackenzie King instituted this national insurance scheme. Unemployment insurance was brought into being to make absolutely certain that no one would starve, lose their home or loved one as a result of losing a job. This deep caring for humanity is deeply embedded in the Liberal Party tradition.

[*Translation*]

It would be wrong to say that we in the Liberal Party do not want the Act changed, amended or improved. In fact, Mr. Speaker, in 1955 and 1971, under Liberal Governments, amendments were made to bring this legislation up to date with the needs of the time.

However, Mr. Speaker, that is not what this Bill proposes. As presented by the Minister of Employment and Immigration, this Bill threatens one of the main pillars of this country's social security network. Indeed, the Minister dares to go ahead with this Bill, even after she claimed in the last election campaign that if she and her party were returned to power, no social program would be privatized.

Mr. Speaker, it is really a shame that Canadians have been misled by this Minister and her party, and I can assure you that next time, they will not be fooled.

[*English*]

Millions of Canadians are asking themselves why the Government has decided to go back on its election promises. People are asking themselves why Canada's sacred trust has lost its sanctity with the Progressive Conservative Party.

In my opinion and that of my Party, there are three reasons why the Government has adopted this policy. The first reason is rather clear, given the contents of the Minister of Finance's leaky Budget. In an inappropriate manner, the Government is using the proposed Bill C-21 as a means of cutting Canada's national debt, 50 per cent of which was accumulated during the time the Conservatives have been in power. That is a fact Members opposite would conveniently like to forget.

We have frequently seen the Government's total lack of caring or understanding of average Canadians. The provisions of this Bill are the worst example of that fact. What the Minister is doing, along with her colleagues in Cabinet, is attempting to cut the deficit on the backs of the unemployed. Instead of strengthening the Canadian unemployment insurance system, the Government is cutting its commitment in a futile deficit reduction exercise. Instead of choosing a more logical means of cutting the deficit, such as taxing profitable corporations and cutting back on waste and inefficiency of government, the Minister is attacking those Canadians who have the least to offer.

The Minister is taking the money that would have gone to pay for the rent, food, and other basic necessities and allocating it for training programs. I would have been supportive of the creation of new skill training programs, but not at the expense of funds that are supposed to help people survive while looking for employment.

It is a strange set of priorities that the Minister is displaying. Instead of understanding the cyclical nature of poverty and the fact that basic assistance is needed to sustain life while individuals are unemployed, she is offering obscure and abstract training programs that will some day enable people to sustain themselves. What these people need is assistance to get by until they can find real jobs with real potential.