

Adjournment Debate

[English]

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE—NEWFOUNDLAND FISHERMEN—
REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE

Mr. George Baker (Gander-Twillingate): Mr. Speaker, I am so pleased to keep hearing from government Members that the Government will have consultations. It has bothered me sometimes in listening to recent answers given by Cabinet Ministers in the House to learn that exactly the opposite is true. Exactly the opposite is true in the worst way imaginable.

I realize it is difficult for Ministers to know what the facts are, because they have a lot of work to do and they have to prepare for Question Period. However, we have reached the point in the House where we are dealing with primary producers who are forced to turn to welfare to live and who cannot feed their families, yet the Minister stands in this House, as she did on November 13, and says the following:

● (1820)

It is my understanding that in the last few weeks there have been sufficient fishing opportunities so as to permit fisher people to qualify for the ten weeks that would allow them to collect unemployment insurance benefits.

While the Minister was saying that, Mr. Speaker, she had on her desk a recommendation from the Federal Department of Fisheries with respect to instituting a special program so that fishermen could qualify for unemployment insurance benefits. In that report from the federal Department of Fisheries and in the report from the union in Newfoundland, it was said that there were 1,600 families affected by a poor fishing season in that province alone. I am not talking now about the other provinces in Atlantic Canada. Therefore, the Minister had that information on her desk the day before she stood up in the House and gave the answer she did to the question which was put to her.

In answer to my question in which I pointed out that the snow was falling and there were no longer boats out in the water she said she was waiting until the season was completed. She said:

We have made a commitment that we are prepared to go to the limit of \$3 million for all constituencies so affected.

Here are the facts, Mr. Speaker. It was a poor fishing season. It was a poor fishing season last year as well, and the Liberal Government approved—throwing money at problems, as the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) keeps reminding us—a special program whereby fishermen and fish plant workers could receive enough work to qualify for unemployment insurance. In that way they would not have to go on welfare, because they consider drawing welfare is really not right but that unemployment insurance benefits are a legitimate source of income. The Liberal Government approved that special program and the fishermen and the fish plant workers, as they received enough to qualify for unemployment insurance benefits, were laid off.

This year we have the situation where the fishing season was even worse. The Canadian Salt Fish Corporation—there is a measure presently before the House—states that its product is down 15 per cent to 20 per cent because it was a poor fishing

season. The Minister, in responding to that question said that she will increase the allocations for Canada Works up \$3 million without knowing that the very constituencies affected were already up to \$3 million. She repeated in this House that she would not increase the Canada Works allocations any further and she would bring in a special program.

I would like to remind this Minister, Mr. Speaker, after deriding the former Government for doing what was legitimate, that even if she increased the Canada Works allocation to \$3 million, there are rules and regulations in that program which prohibits fishermen from being hired.

I have listened to a lot of debate in this House recently. There was a report concerning women, handicapped people, young people and old people who could not get jobs. Yet a week ago in this House this very Minister tabled qualifications for getting hired on federal works programs which eliminated everyone who had not worked before it eliminated anyone who has been out of the work force for two years; and it eliminated anyone who had had enough gumption to go out and work for a week in the previous two months. That is outrageous, Mr. Speaker.

It is odd that the person writing the report did not discover, or perhaps just did not know, that the Minister would table the guidelines as she did. However, these very guidelines would discriminate against the very fishermen or fish plant workers for whom the Minister says she is going to increase the assistance allocation. To put it very briefly, Mr. Speaker, this Government has refused to bring in a special program in order to assist these poor, unfortunate people who could not afford to buy school books for their children in September of this year; those 1,600 families. That is amazing, Mr. Speaker, because most of them are in Tory ridings. Surely, there must be enough pressure on the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Miss MacDonald) to get her to change her mind.

The Minister has said she is going to increase to \$3 million the allocation to take care of those people, at the same time realizing that the worst hit constituencies were already up to \$3 million. The Minister said in this House that some of the fishermen have now received their unemployment insurance benefits. They received ten weeks, and I will tell you how, Mr. Speaker. They went out day after day in rough weather to get an \$80 stamp. That is what they had to do because they knew no program was coming. They will live throughout the winter, those few fishermen, having their income supplemented by welfare. What a way to treat the primary producers of this nation. It is despicable, Mr. Speaker.

● (1825)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Guy Hudon (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Employment and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, as indicated by the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Miss MacDonald), and I will repeat her words, we have been monitoring very closely the Newfoundland Fishermen issue. The most recent figures provided by the Department of Fisher-