

Maternity Benefits

worth of overpayments were being made out of this fund. We inquired of the minister's officials what had been done in the preceding two years to streamline the administration of the fund to tackle this problem. The answer we received on that occasion, Mr. Speaker, was: nothing. Three hundred million dollars worth of overpayment, a two-year alert to that situation and still the bureaucracy and the minister had done nothing! One of the first things we did was to attempt to ensure that for the same premiums more money would be available to people who would be eligible for the benefits.

One of the other measures we took, Mr. Speaker, was to circulate a discussion paper to provinces, to the unions to management, and to women's groups across the country, proposing amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act, and we began to hold, in the short time we formed the government, working-level meetings to discuss and clarify the options we were proposing. We were seeking input, not on one aspect of the legislation, such as we are discussing here this afternoon, but on all the necessary aspects of the measure. We did this with a view to getting to a point at which the legislation would make sense to Canadians. This bill has been one of the irritants.

Canadians, as I experience them, are people of good will. They do not enjoy paying taxes, but there is a sense of willingness to pay taxes provided people can be convinced that the money they pay to the support of government is being used in worth-while and equitable ways. That was the thrust of the process that our government started and it is a thrust which, as near as I can tell, has not been continued. I think the government opposite has a rather clear and consistent track record of arbitrary decision making, arbitrary confrontation, and minimal consultation with affected groups.

I sat here this afternoon and heard the hon. member opposite defend his bill and, for the most part, I found that defence commendable. I think he did bring to our attention some of the inequities which exist. But I found myself here wondering where was the principle which should guide government policy in this area. What principles are we addressing when a bill such as this is proposed? Where is the fundamental decision as to whether or not the people of Canada would like the government to have sets of social policy that would encourage more rapid population growth in this country? I think we could find lots of people who might testify to the need for a policy which would accelerate population growth.

If you start with that kind of principle or goal for government policy, does that lead one normally and naturally to a revision of the Unemployment Insurance Act? Does it lead to a revision of the Family Allowances Act? Does it lead to a revision of pensions? Where does that starting point take you? It is in that context that we should examine any expenditure plan. Surely this is a component of an expenditure plan.

● (1650)

Is it really equitable to propose that those people who may have been unemployed or are not part of the labour force for an extended period of time and who choose to work on what is

perhaps a short-term project of interest to them, perhaps as short as ten weeks, and who subsequently find themselves pregnant, should receive in those circumstances several weeks of benefits at \$100 or \$120 a month? Is that a priority in federal expenditure as compared to benefits for someone who chooses to raise a family? Perhaps that person would like to have four or five children. Should taxpayers' money be used to support the first case or the second case, and if we have unlimited funds or if we see it as a priority, should we be devoting public money to supporting both cases?

I think it is a mistake for members of Parliament to make decisions regarding the spending of money in one area without sufficient examination of alternate possibilities.

Another option which was presented in the discussion paper and which, I think, bears repeating in this forum and making it part of the public record, is whether there should be a difference in the eligibility for unemployment insurance between those who voluntarily terminate their association with the labour force and those who are terminated in a job through no choice of theirs. In the Chrysler situation where a company lays off a great number of workers, clearly a case can be made for unemployment insurance benefits to be paid, but when people voluntarily choose to leave the labour force, should they have the same rights to benefits from this fund as do others?

Another principle which was important in our discussion paper and in our way of thinking about this fund was the need, at a time when we are experiencing dramatic price increases, to give more careful consideration to the economic needs of those who have dependants, such as single parents, married people who are the sole support of their children, or perhaps relatives who are handicapped. Should they be eligible for a higher level of support than those who only need to support themselves? That is a fundamental principle which should be addressed in terms of the Unemployment Insurance Act, and perhaps in terms of this bill.

One of my colleagues asked a few minutes ago whether the same level of benefits should be granted to a recently widowed woman with three children to support as to someone who might be classed as a millionaire or a multi-millionaire. Do we really believe that public money should be expended equally in both cases? That is a fundamental debate in which this House has not engaged for some time, and in the present circumstances it might be wise some time in the future to have the House engage in that kind of debate because it is an issue which cuts across individual pieces of legislation. It might perhaps speak to the different philosophies of the parties in the House.

The NDP, clearly and consistently, argues in favour of the principle of universality, the paying of the same amount of money to millionaires and to poor people. That is how I would describe that principle. On the other hand our party believes that the taxpayers of Canada are more willing to support and have more faith in governments if they could believe that the money which the government takes away from them is being spent on purposes which they believe they can support.