

realizes that the economic situation has changed in many regions, a fact that the Liberals ignored for so many years. In regions where the unemployment rate is over 15 per cent, the qualifying period of 10 weeks will remain unchanged.

Madam Speaker, as part of the rhetoric that has been typical of this debate, it has been claimed, without giving any explanation, that Bill C-21 was spurious and unfair. But it is quite the opposite. Think about people aged 65 or over who want to go on working. They will be able to do so. Think as well about new parents to whom we propose offering higher special benefits. The combination of maternity, parental and health benefits will be extended from 15 to 30 weeks. These higher benefits will provide parents with a more generous income support plan while at the same time enabling them to reconcile their work objectives and their parental responsibilities. Again I say that this government seeks to make the unemployment insurance program more responsive to the needs of today's active parents.

The bill as amended provides 15 weeks of maternity benefits for the mother at time of birth; 10 weeks of parental benefits for natural or adoptive parents, mother or father, or equally shared by both; five weeks of additional parental benefits for adoptive or natural parents when the child is at least six months old when first brought home; 15 weeks of sickness benefits. This is our way of acknowledging the importance of the woman's role in an active society, just as we acknowledge the responsibilities shared by a couple.

Bill C-21 will come into force with the changes we are advocating. For instance, eligible people will be entitled to a maximum of 30 weeks of special benefits. That is what I call progressive measures.

Madam Speaker, these are only a few examples of benefits available under Bill C-21 which has now been before the Senate since early November, nearly a month.

• (1510)

The bill features a variable entrance requirement which takes regional disparities into account. I repeat that the bill was passed by the elected members of the government. Hon. members passed the bill in the House. The Senate still has three weeks to consider and report the bill before the House recesses for Christmas. Those

who are delaying the bill are holding the unemployed as hostages.

Madam Speaker, again I say that I share the opposition's concerns over the variable eligibility requirements as a temporary solution. Therefore I intend to vote against the motion before the House because I believe we need to implement Bill C-21, a reform which shows full respect for the dignity of the worker and takes into account the prevailing conditions in the economic regions. I will vote against the motion because I hope that, prompted by their collective responsibility, the senators will make haste and send the bill back before we interrupt our work for Christmas.

[English]

**Mr. Allmand:** Madam Speaker, the minister knows that last year there were 2.2 million claimants under the unemployment insurance system. She should also know that as a result of Bill C-21, 155,000 Canadians who would have been claimants will totally lose their claims and 775,000 will have their claims reduced.

As a result of that sort of impact, already the clerk of the Senate committee has received 159 requests by groups to be heard on that bill. Let us say that even if only half those requests to be heard are legitimate, it still gives us about 75 legitimate groups that want to be heard.

Why is the minister opposed to groups of Canadians who feel impacted on Bill C-21 having the right to be heard? I am not talking about groups that were already heard by the House of Commons committee. I am talking about groups that were not heard at all by the House of Commons committee because we had a deadline to meet.

Why is the minister opposed to those groups being heard by the Senate committee and, if she is not opposed to that, why is she not willing to extend the variable entrance requirement for a month or two so that the law will remain the same while the Senate is dealing in a reasonable way with those Canadian groups that want to be heard?

It is not the Senate that wants to extend the time. It is not the Liberal Party. These are groups of Canadians who are being impacted by this bill and they want to make their views known to Parliament. The only means they have to do it is through the Senate committee