

Unemployment Insurance Act

I am truly sad to be in the House this evening because we will be voting on second reading of this Bill in a very short time and unfortunately, with a majority government on the opposite side, we are going to lose this vote.

Canadians will long remember this. Canadians will not forget this. Certainly we on this side of the House will do our best to remind Canadians of the dastardly approach and the dastardly deeds which this Government is perpetrating on this nation.

Mrs. Edna Anderson (Simcoe Centre): Mr. Speaker, we are very fortunate to live in this high-tech era. We can enjoy wonders of technological ingenuity today that were inconceivable even to the last generation.

Personal computers, VCRs, word processors; all of these conveniences have become part of our daily existence. They are the result of technology which was non-existent 30 years ago.

This technology is enhancing our personal lives but it is also affecting us in the workplace. Canadian workers must meet an unprecedented demand for skills. That demand will only increase in the years ahead.

That is why I support this legislation to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act. Bill C-21 is a major component of the Government's Labour Force Development Strategy. The key to this strategy is that it will help train Canadians in the skills they need now and in the future.

Bill C-21 has three objectives. The first is to prepare Canadian workers for existing and future labour market challenges. The second is to right some longstanding wrongs by ensuring that the Act meets the Government's commitment to employment equity and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The third is to ensure that UI benefits are improved and preserved for those who need them most.

• (2220)

I would like to concentrate my remarks on that third area, Mr. Speaker. This legislation proposes fundamental changes to the UI program which affect the amount of time people must work to qualify for UI benefits and how long benefits will last. It also introduces new control measures. Canada is a very generous country. This generosity extends to its social programs, including

unemployment insurance. As it now stands people need only work 10 to 14 weeks to qualify for benefits depending on the local unemployment rate. These entrance requirements are among the lowest in the world. In Japan and France people must work 26 weeks during the previous year in order to qualify. But the generosity can sometimes have detrimental repercussions.

As a Member of Parliament in my riding of Simcoe Centre many constituents often tell me that this is the case with the UI program, that our UI system is a disincentive to work. Many people believe that UI encourages some people to work just long enough to qualify for assistance who then quit and collect benefits for up to a year. Now I know that the vast majority of Canadians do not fall into this category and I would never imply that they do. But it is an irrefutable fact that some people are trying to take advantage of this system and those that do think that they are beating it.

We are proposing to increase the number of weeks of employment needed to qualify for UI in most areas of the country based on a local unemployment rate. My constituents in Simcoe Centre believe this is a very reasonable approach. This means, for example, that people living in communities where unemployment is at 6 per cent will need to work 20 weeks to qualify for UI instead of the current 14 weeks. At the same time the Bill remains sensitive to the needs of those people in areas of high unemployment. People living in areas where the unemployment rate is more than 15 per cent will need only ten weeks to qualify. Where the unemployment rate is 10 per cent only 16 weeks is needed to qualify.

For seasonal workers these new provisions may sound threatening. Let me assure them that they have no reason to be concerned. You see, Mr. Speaker, seasonal workers by the very nature of their employment often collect UI twice within the same 52-week period. A current clause in the Act requires people who have already collected benefits within the past year to work from 16 to 20 weeks in order to qualify again. This is six weeks more than when they first qualify. This is known as the repeater clause. It was an onerous condition for seasonal workers and we are now eliminating it entirely. This means that seasonal workers will, generally speaking, now find it easier to qualify for UI.