

*Unemployment Insurance Act*

merely has to hold up the antiquated, well-thumbed report of the Gill Commission in order to emphasize the point I am trying to make. Without going too far beyond the scope of the bill I believe I have indicated the general dissatisfaction some of us have about the manner in which the government has been approaching this particular aspect of our social life. After all, this administration has been in office since 1963.

In closing I should like to deal with one other point which may be discussed in greater detail by one or two of my colleagues. I have in mind the administrative change which has resulted in the closing of many local offices of the Unemployment Insurance Commission. We have seen the development of a hodgepodge of miscellaneous programs with which the Minister of National Health and Welfare is familiar, such as the supplementary benefit, the Canada Assistance Plan and so on. Coupled with these we have the other plans which come under the provincial sphere of jurisdiction such as unemployment assistance, social welfare and others. We have now reached a point where an increasing number of people just do not know where to go in order to ascertain the benefits to which they are entitled.

I believe some sort of functional administration should be established so that some person would be available who could advise people, for instance, that while they are not entitled under the rules to unemployment insurance they may be entitled to something else. This person would then advise them to what assistance they might be entitled. In this way we might be able to reduce some of the attempts to abuse the fund. When people are unemployed, ill or in need of funds with which to purchase groceries it is not unnatural that they should want to have those funds available. The very existence of the unemployment insurance fund, as well as the publicity about the Canada Assistance Plan and a guaranteed floor under which the income of no Canadian will fall, is an indication that there is some governmental responsibility in this regard. Therefore it is not surprising that many people believe they are entitled to benefits from this fund. It is a public fund in any event, whatever its source.

The division of services between the Unemployment Insurance Commission and the manpower branch of the Department of Manpower and Immigration, whereby the employment office function and unemployment insurance have been separated, means

[Mr. Barnett.]

that in many communities there is no place to which a person can go in order to discuss his unemployment insurance with someone who is officially charged with the responsibility of providing such information. He must obtain such information by letter, long distance telephone or by driving 50, 100 or 150 miles. He will have access to an office of the manpower administration but is unlikely to find anyone there who can give him information concerning unemployment insurance. A recent letter I have received would seem to indicate that in the opinion of the Minister of Labour (Mr. Nicholson) and the commission it is not considered necessary to have even an agent at such offices who could assist in the preparation of application forms.

I appreciate any efforts which are made to reduce the administrative costs in respect of any of these plans. I suggest, however, it is not proper that people should be left sitting high and dry in increasing numbers and then have to write to their members of parliament to ask where they should go in order to make application for unemployment insurance or for assistance under the Canada Assistance Plan. I believe the idea of having someone located in a district who could give advice in respect of these various plans should be seriously considered because they have grown up more or less like Topsy. By this means we would be able to reduce the administrative overhead not only in respect of unemployment insurance but also in respect of a great number of other plans. While I realize that this point may not be directly related to the principle of the bill I believe it is a matter of importance in respect of the operation of the unemployment insurance scheme, the collection of contributions and the determination of whether or not these contributions are collected properly by an employer, as well as establishing that the application is in order to determine whether or not a person is qualified.

When the minister closes the debate I hope he will comment on whether or not such an idea has occurred to him or has been considered by the government in discussions with the provincial administrations. The basic changes in the concept of unemployment insurance have been such that they have created a good deal of confusion. One may ask whether it is merely a transitional confusion or a confusion which is inherent in the situation that is being developed at the administrative level. I believe this is an important question and one on which the minister might make some comment before this debate concludes.