

Supply

Still, the minister spoke of five new conditions, five new programs, if you will, that are now provided for in the bill. We know very well that these five different kinds of benefits will surely help those truly in need.

I still go back to my region and I know full well that the people who work in the natural resources area, especially those who work part-time and in seasonal industries, are often penalized by the current system. The system we are proposing will right this wrong which has been going on for much too long.

• (1305)

I can give you some first-hand examples. In the Magdalen Islands, fisherman's helpers—this is just one example among many others—used to work and still work 10 weeks a year to qualify for 42 weeks of UI benefits. When the program was changed, they had to work 12 weeks to qualify for only 30 weeks of UI benefits. That meant 10 weeks without income for these fisherman's helpers who worked, might I add, not 35 hours a week, not 50 hours a week, but rather 70 hours a week on average. Such is the life of a fisherman's helper in the Magdalen Islands, in the Gaspé Peninsula and, of course, on the lower North Shore.

I can also give you similar examples of men and women who work long hours in the forest industry, throughout eastern Quebec and rural Quebec. Unfortunately, these people were penalized. The number of hours they worked was not taken into consideration. With the new system, we now know that 12 weeks of work equal 420 hours of work. But I can assure the House that these people, these fisherman's helpers in the Magdalen Islands, for example, work an average of 700 hours in 10 weeks.

These people will be able to qualify. The people will not go without benefits for 10 weeks, as we have seen these past two years. This is what the reform is all about. I think it is encouraging to see in this debate that both sides of the House recognize that seasonal workers do work hard and do put in countless hours of work.

Thus, companies will be better able to evaluate the efforts made by these workers in various areas. I can tell you of all kinds of examples, such as people who work in fish factories. I met a few of them in Pasbébiac, Gascons and ridings around Bonaventure—Îles-de-la-Madeleine who work close to 90 hours a week. That is substantial. Unfortunately, as we know, these people were not eligible because, depending on the species harvested in the summer, the fishing season is often restricted to 10 or 12 weeks.

So I believe we have corrected an iniquity that harmed the regions. Of course, the opposition is claiming that these cuts are unfair and wrong, while they mostly benefit people who earn no more than \$40,000. Very few of my constituents earn \$40,000 or

more in seasonal jobs. Most of them are low-wage workers who did not have a chance to become educated or to find long-term jobs. Life is not always easy and the first thing that we have to acknowledge here today is that we want to help those who really need it.

I remarked to the hon. member for Mercier, the other day, that in her own constituency, there are female or male single parents with two or three children and an income of less than \$26,000. They did not have certain opportunities. That is why we want to establish a program for the underprivileged who really need it.

There is no shame in telling to those who earn \$55,000, \$60,000 ou \$70,000 in a few weeks or in a few months, in the worst cases, that they have to reimburse, in part or in full, the unemployment insurance benefits they received. That is fairness. That is justice. That is the main goal of federalism as we know it.

I heard some positive criticisms, but then I hear members of the Bloc Québécois say: "We are not happy with the situation. We only want the federal government to transfer the whole amount directly to the province of Quebec and let it run the program altogether".

• (1310)

However, no one on that side spoke about the difficulties encountered by the people, the problems they have in finding a job, in getting training. No one ever mentioned the 40 per cent dropout rate in Quebec.

As members of the Canadian government, we believe in this decentralization, and I want to tell you, especially my good friend, the member for Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, that the Canadian government, with the offices it already has, will now be able to work in co-operation with stakeholders, social and community leaders in all of the regions of Quebec and, of course, of Canada.

We are ready to design programs that accurately reflect the needs of our regions, of our employers, of our workers. That is what we want to do. We do not want, like the SQDM and its 12 service points, to establish programs in Quebec City, which will then be imposed upon my constituents. For our part, with our 90 service points and the others which will be developed very shortly in the province of Quebec, we will at last fill a real and urgent need, that is designing programs that will help create stable, durable and gainful employment. That is the main purpose of this bill, as set out by the federal government.

Unfortunately, my time has expired. There are surely a lot of questions. But I invite the opposition, and the public to review the information and to take advantage of the new programs, which are there for the people and not for civil servants.