

Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971

to enjoy the same privileges as urban residents who have better chances of finding employment.

Mr. Speaker, again I must get back to the free trade deal as it relates to the question of unemployment benefits. If we consider the issue in light of the free trade text now available, if we keep in mind that both countries will have to synchronize their policies, that means—in fact, on the basis of this agreement, will the Americans set up social programs which will be as effective as the ones we have here in Canada?

Will the Americans accept unemployment insurance programs like the ones we have in Canada, or will it be the other way round and will Canadians have to adjust and harmonize with the Americans, in other words, cut down on their social programs? And we must not forget that our unemployment insurance system is also used to cover certain aspects of health care.

Mr. Speaker, there is another aspect of unemployment insurance we tend to forget, which the Government has abolished, and which unfortunately has yet to be reinstated, namely the provisions for older workers.

A year and a half ago, we still had the Liberal Government program that dealt with the needs of workers in the textile, footwear and clothing industry and in specific regions, such as the asbestos-producing area. This employee adjustment program was supposed to deal with the impact of technological change. Workers fifty-five and over, who had worked for a certain number of years in the textile industry in the region concerned would, in case of layoffs, be eligible for the program which was the equivalent of unemployment insurance, namely 60 per cent of their salary until the age of sixty-five. Meanwhile, these people could, after a regular year, draw unemployment insurance benefits. Even if they found another more or less regular job and lost it again, they could come back and still be fully eligible for the adjustment program.

The Conservative Government announced the program would be abolished and said that it would negotiate another program with the provinces which would be called the Older Worker Adjustment Program. That was a year and some months ago, and no progress has been made. The provinces refused to accept the federal Government's proposal. Before, the program was 100 per cent funded by the federal Government, while today, the Government is proposing to have a new program funded on a fifty-fifty basis. At this very moment, the provinces are all very reluctant. Meanwhile, we have about 500 workers in Canada, three-quarters of whom are in Quebec, who would be eligible under the previous program.

I have nothing against the Government wanting to improve the program or offering a new program. But I disagree with the Government abolishing the old program in the belief that the new one would be accepted within six months. At the moment, older working men and women in Canada are excluded from this program, simply because the Government was negligent. As Mr. Paradis, the Quebec Income Security Minister, was saying: The Federal Government should have

maintained the old program, which was good, during the negotiations period and after an agreement with the provinces on the new one had been reached, then it could have been abolished.

But today, because of the Government's shortsightedness, some 500 older workers throughout Canada are not eligible for the new program which has not yet been implemented, and they have lost their rights to the old one. If some of these people are forced to go on welfare, the others cannot, because their spouses have no income or some property. And we know that under the social security legislation, people must be almost destitute to be entitled to this type of assistance.

Mr. Speaker, you are indicating to me that I have two minutes left. I hope that this bill will reach Second Reading and committee stage, for the Liberal Party intends to support it. I also hope that when it is called upon to consider this bill, the Committee will accept amendments calling for a five year extension, in order to convince all Canadians that this is government policy . . . The bill will be reconsidered if ever there is a thorough reform of the Unemployment Insurance scheme. I should like also the Government to take remedial action as soon as possible, so that the 500 older workers and the others who join their ranks every month, may become eligible either for the old program or the new one. I should like the Federal Government, when the negotiations are over, to implement a new readaptation program for older workers, making them all eligible to Unemployment Insurance benefits.

[*English*]

Hon. Warren Allmand (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine East): Mr. Speaker, as Hon. Members have already stated, the purpose of this Bill is to extend the variable entry requirement for unemployment insurance for one more year, until January 3, 1989. Before I deal with the substance of the Bill, I want to say that its handling is another example of a lack of co-operation with the Opposition by the Government in dealing with House business. I was told last Friday that this Bill would be brought forward for debate on Tuesday of this week. I prepared myself for that. However, late Monday I was told it would not be put forward on Tuesday, that Tuesday to be an Opposition Day, and I would be advised later when the Bill would come forward. Late Tuesday I was told that the Government wanted to proceed with it yesterday, and yesterday afternoon was the only day of the week that I could not be here to deal with the Bill because I had agreed to serve on a panel at Concordia University in Montreal to discuss refugee policy with the Minister of State for Immigration (Mr. Weiner) and a representative of the Inter-church Committee for Refugees. The Minister of State for Immigration could not go but he was to be replaced by the Parliamentary Secretary who could not attend either because of the snowstorm.

● (1130)

Nevertheless, the only day this week that I could not be here to deal with this Bill was yesterday afternoon. Despite that, the Government plowed ahead and put the Bill forward for debate.