

Government Orders

Just last year, the former Conservative government introduced two bills respecting unemployment insurance. The first one was Bill C-105, and you will remember that there was so much controversy about this bill tabled by the then minister of employment that he had to table an all new one, namely Bill C-113, in which the number of instances where the benefit of the doubt was given to the unemployed instead of the commission was reduced. It also provided for a reduction in unemployment insurance rates.

• (1515)

I will read, as it is worthwhile remembering, some of the statements that were made at the time by members of the current Liberal government, in particular the hon. member for York South who, coincidentally, is Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Human Resources Development. He had this to say about Bill C-113: "Reaction has been so strong because the changes to the unemployment insurance program contained in Bill C-113 threaten every Canadian who has a job. By reducing the benefit rate from 60 per cent to 57 per cent of insurable earnings, the government is going to be taking money out of the pockets of some families. It may only be \$80 a month, but for some households, that represents the hydro and phone bills or a weekly order of groceries".

For the vast majority of Canadians who live pay cheque to pay cheque, losing an extra \$80 a month can be a major set-back. What about today? There is another 2 per cent reduction, which amounts to some \$50 a month. We can now repeat the arguments that the parliamentary secretary put forward at the time and ask how come he cannot influence the minister he is so close to. What happened in the past year that caused the parliamentary secretary to do such an about-face on the benefit rate reduction? We wonder.

He read a letter—I am certain that the situation has not changed—that had been sent to one of his colleagues. The letter was addressed to the Minister of Employment with a copy to his colleague. It was from an expectant mother who was distressed to learn that UI benefits she would receive during maternity leave were going to be reduced from 60 per cent to 57 per cent.

And I could go on for several more pages because the Parliamentary Secretary to the current Minister of Human Resources Development has been, I must admit, one of the most prolific in this regard, especially when young people are concerned. He waxed indignant against the previous government's attempts to cut unemployment insurance, saying, among other things, that young people and women were perhaps the two social groups that were the most threatened by UI cuts because their jobs, as everyone knows, are the most precarious. Thirty per cent of precarious jobs are held by young people and even more, nearly 50 per cent, by women.

I find it hard to understand. I am asking people whom I know have social convictions, who are now on the government side, why, now that they are in office, they continue to support a bill now at the last stage of the adoption process which will take, let me remind you, \$1.3 billion out of the pockets of unemployed Canadians.

I will now read an excerpt from a speech delivered on March 24, 1993 by the current Chairman of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development when he was a member of the opposition. He said: "Once again the Tories have chosen to ask those that are the main victims of the recession, the unemployed, to bear the burden of expenditure restraint, while at the same time, they enact other measures that allow the wealthy to continue to escape paying their fair share of taxation and contributing to deficit reduction".

• (1520)

Today our leader asked a question about family trusts. Why did you not stop them? Why did you not do something so that people who hold considerable fortunes in family trusts pay more tax? Despite a negative answer, the bill that will be passed in a few hours talks about cuts to unemployment insurance. Not just anyone is saying that; it comes from the current chairman of the human resources development committee, of which I am a member.

What could have happened in a year to make this member, who was then in opposition, do an about-face, turn around 180 degrees and agree to have his government pass a bill that will again cut payments to the poorest people.

Now the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce made a long speech on it. He said: "When more than a million Canadians are without work and struggling to feed their children, pay the rent and meet their families' basic needs, the government cuts their benefits from 60 to 57 per cent of their insurable earnings for two years, saying that it hopes to restore them to 60 per cent when the economy is better". Listen to this: "This measure is unacceptable and we will continue to fight it". He did not continue much longer. A year later, the same member is on the government side; his government is proposing not only to go back to the previous measure but to take off another 2 per cent for 85 per cent of those unemployed people.

What has happened to this member in a year? Nevertheless, the member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce is very experienced and is surely used to the idea that an opposition member may one day quote what he said in *Hansard*. What has happened to make this member remain silent today?

If it were only backbenchers! Now here is a question from the present Minister of Human Resources Development. It is vaguer, but we still see which way he was going then. He said: "Yesterday, the Minister of Employment made what we could call an outrageous speech to the Empire Club in Toronto. Once again, he attacked the unemployed and unemployment insurance. He said that Canada's social programs were like a net to