

Unemployment Insurance Act

election campaign people asked me what was going on with regard to the Unemployment Insurance Commission.

• (2050)

The government said in 1972 there would be something in the order of \$1 billion in terms of employee benefits. We know what it is now. It is almost \$2 billion. Yet we are told that we do not have the right to probe into that matter and ask questions about it. Are we being told that we should be as irresponsible as members opposite have been and still are? As I have said, one of the prime functions of the opposition should be that of a watchdog on the public purse. We must not forget that. They may not like what we are doing, they may not think it is necessary, but I say they must take their lumps. The minister said they must take their lumps. Certainly they do, because they were wrong then and are wrong now in attempting to remove this ceiling. In effect they are removing parliamentary control and are emasculating the supremacy of parliament in doing so. I say that no one should vote in favour of this bill without carefully considering the paramountcy of parliament in respect of government spending. Where are we going? Are we being told that the matter of spending should be left to the whims and fancies of cabinet? Surely that is not what this great institution is all about.

An hon. Member: What about the committee?

Mr. Alexander: The committee does not mean a thing when the government is still insistent on maintaining the principle of removing the ceiling. Should spending be at the whim and fancy of cabinet, or should it be on the direction and approval of parliament? I suggest it should be the latter.

The Minister of Justice, as a matter of fact—who played some role before the committee—indicated he agreed with the proposition that moneys which are appropriated from the consolidated revenue fund should be appropriated in accordance with the terms set out by parliament; he agreed with that. But for some reason or other he says that is what he would say in any other circumstance, but in this circumstance this is not needed and that they will do it on their own.

The former Minister of Labour, in one of his more exciting contributions when involved in this matter, said the opposition was not needed, that they could do it themselves without us. However, I say they need us to check them. I do not want anyone to make any mistakes. There are some members over there who are confused. What we are talking about are the advances, the working capital. It seems to me that in 1971-72 the working capital, or the advances were under control. We endeavoured with all our wherewithal to ascertain from this government why it had the control in the first place or why it had the limit in the first place. There was much speculation. The Minister of Justice, speaking on behalf of the minister who was ill at that time, said he thought it was useful, convenient and desirable. He did not say, however, that it was needed. I respectfully say that it was not only useful, convenient and desirable but that section 137(4) was needed on the basis of the information they had received from either the minister of National Revenue, the Minister of Finance, the Department of Manpower, or the Unemployment Insur-

[Mr. Alexander.]

ance Commission and all the statistics that could be gathered together.

They decided they should be careful and place a limit in order to have some control. The Minister of Finance said he could not be paying out money helter-skelter at the whim of cabinet, but must have some control. What came out of all that? Here we have it. This was the bible at the time: it is a document giving facts and figures on unemployment insurance in the seventies. What a snow job that was! Now they discount it. They tell us to throw it away because they did not mean to say what is contained in this document. As a matter of fact, I believe the Minister of Justice said that it was sort of a guess. I remember that the unemployment insurance hierarchy indicated that under every circumstance which they could possibly bring forward, including consideration of all the variables, the amount that would be sufficient for the advances was \$700 million. But they went one step further. They thought they would toss in another \$100 million.

Is it not amazing that at that time they were so sure? They were absolutely positive that a ceiling was necessary in the new panacea for the ills of the Unemployment Insurance Act. What do we have now? We have the old flip-flop, the U-turn. As I look at this government, "U-turn and flip-flop" would seem to be its new name. When this government wants me to buy this nonsense, I say I am not buying it. They came to us in 1971 and asked us to believe them. We said we could not because we had figures which showed they were wrong. Then they told us not to believe our figures because they were wrong. They said that they had the expertise, the bureaucracy and the knowledge.

An hon. Member: And the computer.

Mr. Alexander: Let us not get involved with the computer. I say that controls are needed. I was convinced about this in the first instance. I say this is needed so that the people will have some indication of what is going on in terms of their money. This is the only protection the people have. We say that the government should come to parliament. We are not saying that the government cannot have any more money, but we are saying that it should come to us when it wants money. This is our responsibility; that is what section 137(4) is all about. Every conceivable argument was raised to have that provision included at that time. Now every conceivable argument is being projected in order to take it out. We cannot accept this flip-flop philosophy. It is not only unacceptable, it is irresponsible. It brings into question the competence and integrity of this government in enacting any of its policies, and especially its policy on unemployment insurance.

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I am not saying that they did this deliberately, but perhaps they should get rid of all that staff because now we are questioning the government's intelligence. Perhaps they are the ones who should have gone. I see that a few of them are still around but I do not want to mention names. I will leave the poor former minister alone because he has been my friend over the years. He was sold a big bag of goods and he had to defend this bill for all its worth knowing that perhaps, as he said, he should