

Government Orders

skills and work ethic are maximized. By changing the welfare system that will happen.

As to the second question, I do not differentiate because we are all equal. However society is much more receptive to men who are involved in the business realm than women. As a government we have a chance to do something unique in this mandate by moving women in business from the back burner to the front burner. If we were a House of Commons that did that, it would be one of the great experiences we could leave this place.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvan Bernier (Gaspé, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to take part in today's debate on the social programs reform. I did not think this issue would show up so soon on the Order Paper, but I am glad it did, because I spent last Thursday, November 17, working with my riding assistants to organize public hearings, since I feel that the Gaspé constituents will be hard hit by the measures proposed in the social reform.

So, along with my assistants, I decided to hold public hearings, because the closest the Parliamentary Committee will come to my area is Rivière-du-Loup, a one day journey away. As you can understand, my constituents wanted to be heard on this issue. However, because of the distance, few will be able to make it to Rivière-du-Loup on December 11.

I organized these hearings with the firm belief that this social programs reform is such a crucial issue that it goes beyond partisanship. With this in mind, and that will make some of the members opposite smile, I asked the director of an hospital centre, a known Liberal, as well as a former PQ minister and MNA for Gaspé, to give me a hand. With these two commissioners on board, we heard something like 18 witnesses, including representatives of at least 16 social organizations.

If only to pay tribute to these people, since this had to be organized rather quickly because I also thought crucial to start the discussion in my constituency, I would like to mention them in this House.

So, the following have made themselves heard: the Regional Municipality of Côte de Gaspé, the Gaspé Chamber of Commerce, CRCD, the concertation committee of the Regional Municipality of Parbock, the Regroupement contre l'appauvrissement dans l'est du Québec, the United Church, CASA, the Anglophone Social Action Committee, the Ralliement gaspésien et madelinot, the Anse-à-Valleau Development Committee, the Denis Riverin Unemployment Action, the Regional municipality of Parbock Work Action, the Gaspé CNTU, the Association des capitaines propriétaires de la Gaspésie, the Regroupement des pêcheurs professionnels du sud de la Gaspésie.

• (1600)

We also heard from Rural Dignity and the Regroupement des femmes and others whose name I forget. These are either regional or local groups and this was reflected in their comments. But they are all wondering if after the reform proposed by the minister the safety net which we have now in Canada will still suit Gaspé constituents. Madam Speaker, allow me to state at the outset that people are very sceptical about that.

I would like to state a few facts. First of all, people from the Gaspé Peninsula know how to read. They heard about the leaks in the *Toronto Star* regarding the possible cuts of \$7.5 billion and another \$7.5 billion that would accompany this reform. Every time they were questioned about their briefs, they would talk about these cuts. They would tell us also that, from their viewpoint, the objective of the reform is not to improve assistance to the needy, but rather to cut assistance to the disadvantaged. To them, it is absolutely inconceivable.

Some facts about our riding are in order. As I have already mentioned to the Minister of Human Resources Development, the riding of Gaspé receives approximately 27,000 unemployment insurance applications a year. About 33 per cent of those applicants have worked only 10 or 11 weeks. It is not because they do not want to work longer. There are no jobs. Our region has to live with the seasons.

If I look at the situation in some areas in particular, in the Chandler area for example, 38 per cent of UI applicants have worked only 10 or 11 weeks. These figures were provided to me by the employment centres for the Gaspé Peninsula and the Islands. In the Magdalen Islands area, and my colleague opposite can correct me if I am wrong, close to 40 per cent of UI applicants have worked only 10 or 11 weeks.

I used to work for the fishing industry, representing fishermen, and I wonder where these people could go to work more weeks, especially considering the fact that this resource has been scarce. When the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans declares a moratorium on fishing, his goal is the conservation of stocks, but the Minister of Human Resources Development is telling us we should be working more. In the Madgalen Islands and the Gaspé Peninsula, our economy is seasonal in nature. Tourism is a seasonal industry, although we have started to take action in order to extend the season. We have yet to reap the full results of those measures and reach our ultimate goal, which is to have people work during at least six months each year in viable businesses.

Forestry workers would also like to work more. The problem they face is winter conditions. When winter begins, at about this time of year, at the beginning of December, there is already a fair amount of snow high up in the mountains beyond Sainte-Anne-des-Monts. It is very difficult to work in the snow, not only be-