

Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971

ing how appreciative I am of the attendance of the minister this evening. I do not like to pat him on the back to any great extent—

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Pat him a little lower down, then.

Mr. Alexander:—but it shows that he, among very few of his colleagues, not only started the debate on this bill but wants to hear the views and submissions, and I think constructive criticisms, of the members of this House.

When I was speaking at five o'clock I was giving the House some indication of the Prime Minister's attitude to working and not working. This leads me to ask what this piece of legislation will do for the people in the Atlantic provinces where presently exists a situation of chronic unemployment due, I contend, to the policy of the government. Its regional expansion program, according to what I have heard in this House, is not the best legislation, nor is its implementation benefiting to any great extent those people in need.

Unemployment figures as at the end of March indicate that in the Atlantic region there were 70,000 people unemployed. This is why I continually emphasize the fact that if the development of this great nation is to go forward, the main priority should be that government policy ensures that as many people as can be absorbed into the labour force are given gainful employment. I cannot help but re-emphasize that in order for us to raise sufficient funds to achieve this objective we must have an adequate tax base.

There are several sections in this bill raising questions of interest and concern and calling for deep consideration, not only by members on this side of the House but by members on the other side. Unemployment insurance programs should maintain a proper balance between providing temporary income maintenance and facilitating reabsorption into productive activity. Therefore, with all due respect to the arguments of the minister, I question whether the reduction of the qualifying period to an eight-week attachment to the labour market is practicable in view of the probable abuses that this will encourage. Further, such a short period of time does not indicate even a strong seasonal attachment to the labour force.

I should like to know why the minister picked on the period of eight weeks. Would not 12 weeks have been more in keeping with creating incentives to enable people to help themselves? The reduction of the qualifying period to eight weeks would be of little assistance even to the growing number of young persons with no experience who are neither eligible for unemployment insurance benefits nor for retraining programs. It is significant that the white paper and the legislation which follows it is silent on this very important matter.

I think we have to create a climate wherein employment is available. Unemployment is not unemployment when it is self-induced, self-inflicted or a matter of choice. I suggest that the eight-week period should receive close examination because I believe there are many people in Canada concerned about this aspect of

[Mr. Alexander.]

the legislation. Just imagine, Mr. Speaker, a person becoming eligible for benefit under the Unemployment Insurance Act after a minimum period of eight weeks. As the act now stands, people qualify if they work 32 weeks out of 52, though I stand to be corrected on that. I should like to know why there has been such a big reduction in the period, and I hope the minister will provide an answer. We feel that it is a disincentive, that it will stifle initiative and, most important and lasting, it will encourage people to take the attitude: Why should we work, when the government will look after us? This is an attitude taken, not by the majority of people but by too many of the minority.

We may be able to make some improvement in this particular area. In this regard I should like to draw the attention of the minister to an article that emphasizes very graphically the point I am trying to make. I refer to an article that appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on Thursday, September 24, 1970. I should like to read it in depth because it illustrates the thinking of many people in connection with the new unemployment insurance legislation. The article reads in part:

The flaws in Mr. Mackasey's proposals are more basic. He appears to have made little effort to separate the seasonal worker, who does not expect year-round employment, from genuine members of the labour force. There are many seasonal workers, who do everything from packing apples to picking tobacco to serving as clerks during the Christmas rush. Many of these people not only do not expect to work full-time, they do not want to. What is more, they can never expect to pay enough into the insurance pot to balance what they will withdraw from it. Therefore they are not insuring themselves against unemployment; they are taking a cheap ride on the backs of those who are.

This is a point that concerns many people and it is why I feel the eight-week period must be examined closely. The article continues:

• (8:10 p.m.)

Mr. Mackasey proposes far too easy access to benefits, which are already too accessible to seasonal workers. The present plan requires 30 employment weeks in the previous two years to establish eligibility for benefits. The new plan would provide some benefits after eight weeks of work in the previous 52 weeks and full benefits after 20 weeks in the previous 52.

Plainly the need is to separate seasonal jobs from full-time jobs, with only the latter being insured. Income supplements to seasonal workers should be provided as welfare on the usual means test; and those seasonal workers who work only for pin-money would not receive benefits at the expense of the real work force.

That is the bone of contention, whether in fact the eight-week period is consistent with the initiative and desire of a person to become a productive member of the work force. We have to give this question consideration. I was impressed when the minister indicated that he would like higher benefits to be paid at this particular time. He then became concerned with the administrative hang-up and was not able to bring himself to accepting a suggestion the opposition has continually made. Because of the gravity of the situation we have suggested that these people should be collecting more money at this time. In view of the unemployment induced by the government, it is amazing that the minister could not see his way clear to do this now instead of waiting until some time in July.