

Unemployment Insurance Act

virtue of the act are published in the monthly financial statements which are tabled in this House. Thus hon. members have several opportunities for obtaining information concerning the financial aspect of the program and for calling the commission or the government to task.

But most of all, the ceiling is inappropriate because payments to claimants are statutory and not discretionary as far as the Unemployment Insurance Commission is concerned. It is essential in any circumstances that the commission always have access to sufficient funds to pay the legal claims of the unemployed, no matter what the level of unemployment might be. If the commission had discretionary power over how many claims could be honoured in any year, then it could be appropriate to have a fixed dollar limit upon advances to the unemployment insurance account. But I cannot visualize this House ever seriously considering the denial of benefits to qualified claimants.

The fact of the matter is that parliament, in its wisdom, has enacted the terms and conditions of payment of benefits, on the one hand, and this act, on the other hand, by imposing a ceiling is restricting the availability of funds and may prevent the commission from implementing that very legislation. Therefore, I now move that Bill C-124 be referred immediately to the Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration for study and report to this House.

Mr. G. W. Baldwin (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, before I commence my few remarks I have a point I want to make to the Chair. In the opinion of this party and myself there are some doubts as to the right of the government at this time to move this bill, having in mind the presence in the Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates of the item L30a. I do not propose to deal with this point or to raise it as a point of order; I merely call it to the attention of the Chair. My colleague the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) will, in due course, be dealing with this matter and he will raise the question and enlarge upon it.

We are dealing with this bill today because of the miscalculation, the deceit, the improper conduct and the illegal actions of this government. These I will deal with later in detail. Because of these facts, the whole course of the administration of unemployment insurance has been brought to the brink of disaster. I have to say that the actions of the government must not be allowed to obscure the fact that there are unemployed persons who are properly entitled to benefits, and it is for this House so to exercise its ingenuity that it ensures that these people are not made to suffer for the sins of the government. This I will deal with later and, with my colleagues, advance proposals and amendments from time to time, both during the course of this debate and later, so that we can bring about this most desirable objective.

If the directors of a joint stock company planning to float a bond debenture or to offer stock to the public are guilty of deception, either by making false statements or by non-disclosure, they face penalties and could well go to jail. Deception is recognized in our modern society. As a matter of fact, section 88(a) of this act provides that any person who makes a false or deceptive statement is guilty of an offence and liable to a fine and/or imprisonment.

[Mr. Andras.]

What if a government, the board of directors of this country, in issuing a prospectus to the public when seeking a new mandate to govern, is guilty of the most flagrant kind of deception with regard to this very legislation? If they had done in non-government life, or in public life outside of the government, the things that they have done in connection with this bill, they would be promptly charged with a course of conduct for which they could be severely penalized and face a fine and/or jail. That is my view of what the government has done in the interval between last summer and today in connection with this very bill. There they sit; sleek, arrogant, smug, feeling assured of power with the support of others in this House. I say quite sincerely that I hope that members of the party to my left will examine with care and with caution what the government has done in this regard so that they will not be found guilty of being accessories after the fact.

Let me now deal step by step with the facts that I shall produce to justify the very serious charges that I have made, and which I shall substantiate with the aid of my hon. friends and colleagues before this debate concludes. The Unemployment Insurance Act, 1971 was dealt with during that year. After second reading, the bill went to committee. I have not had too much time to go through the proceedings of the committee, but I have found some very interesting comments on the particular sections with which we are dealing now. As reported in issue No. 24 of the minutes of proceedings of the Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration for Wednesday, May 19, 1971, officials of the Unemployment Insurance Commission were questioned on the terms of the proposed legislation. At that time they were considering the proposals that brought into effect what is now section 137, and in particular section 137(4). Mr. Steele, one of the officials of the commission who was produced by this government, the sponsor of this bill, as their expert witness in this regard was being questioned by the hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander) who conducted his usual brilliant cross-examination. From page 24:28 I read these questions and answers:

• (1600)

MR. ALEXANDER: Then there is another question. I notice in Clause 137(4) that you have struck an amount:

"... shall not exceed eight hundred million dollars."

I am talking about advances. How did you arrive at that figure?

This is the first time I can recall, or have found as a result of examination, that this figure representing the ceiling on advances was being discussed. The answer was:

MR. STEELE: Mr. Allan can correct me if I am wrong, but the \$800 million include the government advance for a year. In a year of high unemployment the government advance might reach \$500 or \$600 million because it would be getting on to 15 to 18 months of payment of benefits before the amounts were credited to the account.

The hon. gentleman who introduced this bill mentioned this but did not give these figures. The answer continued:

In addition, the shortfall on the employer-employee account could vary anywhere between \$50 and \$100 million for any given year, just as the surplus could vary: it could be as much as \$50 or \$100 million.