

**Mr. Jean-Claude Malépart (Montreal—Sainte-Marie):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to recapitulate what I said earlier regarding Bill C-90, whose purpose is actually to extend an amendment to the Unemployment Insurance Act, under which the Unemployment Insurance Commission may authorize benefits in remote areas on the basis of a variable eligibility period.

This is a valid piece of legislation, and it is a measure initiated by the Liberal Party. It gives fishermen in regions like the Atlantic Provinces, the Gaspé and the Magdalen Islands, considering their limited period of activity and the high unemployment rate in those areas, the right to draw unemployment insurance benefits after ten or twelve weeks of employment. In regions where the unemployment rate is not as high, the eligibility period is twenty weeks.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is important to recall the negative impact that the Conservative Government has had on unemployment insurance. I may remind the House that 46,000 older workers were penalized when the Government cut their unemployment insurance benefits without prior notice. I gave the figures for each province but unfortunately, today there are still people who are being penalized. For instance, when a business announces it is going to close its plant, workers are laid off. All older workers covered by a so-called employee-employer pension plan are not entitled to their full unemployment insurance benefits, while older workers who get the same amount in benefits from a registered retirement savings plan are entitled to draw the full amount of their unemployment insurance benefits.

I think the Conservative Government is perpetuating a flagrant injustice in this case.

I wonder why this amendment is being extended for one year only. Mr. Speaker, I realize that previously, Governments made these changes for one year or for a limited number of years because they were planning to carry out a thorough reform of the unemployment insurance system, which would include this particular aspect. In fact, the committee recommended a uniform period of ten weeks, after which everyone would be eligible.

So today, I wonder why the Government has decided to introduce this amendment for one year only. Is there some connection with the free trade agreement?

We know the Americans consider the unemployment insurance benefits paid to fishermen in Quebec, the Maritimes and Western Canada as a hidden subsidy and thus an unfair trade practice, as they would have it. Isn't it a fact that the Prime Minister is now in Toronto, trying to persuade all the Premiers to accept the Free Trade Agreement, without talking about the contents, and without having seen the final text? And that the Government has introduced a Bill which, to do the Americans a favour, will be effective for one year only, a Bill that deals with how the Unemployment Insurance Act applies to fishermen and maternity benefits and the rest? As soon as this Agreement is signed, sight unseen, the Americans

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can say: Now you will have to withdraw unemployment insurance benefits for fishermen and for maternity benefits and sick leave, because in companies and industries in our country one cannot do that. It would take a uniform period of twenty or twenty-five weeks. Then the Government would not have to say it had backtracked. And the Government would not table this amendment to extend the principle of variable periods for remote areas.

Mr. Speaker, I am very concerned, but I think all Canadians listening to us today should also be concerned that the Government has decided to introduce this amendment for one year only.

I think we should remember this Government promised a thorough reform of the unemployment insurance system. This Government paid the Forget Commission \$6 million to carry out a study, make recommendations and conduct an inquiry. Officials at the Department of Employment and Immigration and other departments worked on draft proposals for changes in the unemployment insurance system.

We had the Committee on Labour, Employment and Immigration, and all Members of all parties in this House were unanimous in wanting to propose changes, and everyone, including workers, unions, business, small businesses, corporations, and provincial Governments, everyone agreed that improvements were needed in the existing unemployment insurance system. Unfortunately, and we remember what the Minister of Employment and Immigration said, and in fact yesterday, instead of looking after his Department, he went off to do a little performance on the program *Vedettes en direct* or *Vedettes indirectes*. I have the impression that yesterday's performance was as disastrous as his proposals for changing the unemployment insurance system. I think it would have been better that he be here this morning to defend the interests of workers instead of trying to sweet-talk anybody.

In this connection, Mr. Speaker, we all recall that the Government simply threw the reports in the trash can—they cost \$7 million, taxpayers' money thrown away. Yet at the same time the Government brought in only one amendment to the Unemployment Insurance Act, and that was the injustice towards older workers who were denied full unemployment insurance benefits. Mr. Speaker, I would think that all people are unanimous on this point, as much the Standing Committee on Employment and Immigration, which included a number of Conservative Members, as my colleague from Notre-Dame-de-Grâce who has been active in this case. They all thought amendments were needed. Everybody is still urging the Government to bring in amendments designed to revamp unemployment insurance programs, extend maternity leaves, and make it easier for people to have access to such a good program. Well, Mr. Speaker, after so much consultation we can see today that the Government is introducing an amendment which the Liberal Party will endorse because the basic principle underlying the amendment relates to a decision of the Liberal Party to make it possible for workers in remote regions