

Private Members' Business

place. As one man put it on an interview on CNN, employment equity is a bit like the Vietnam war. It seemed like a good idea when we started it, but it turned into a nightmare.

Sadly, the government is still living in the past, trying to enact an agenda that is 20 years out of date, well-meaning and soft-hearted, but definitely soft-headed at the same time. On top of that it discriminates against skilled people who cannot label themselves as a visible minority.

I wonder how many Liberal members would be prepared to step down from their seats today, right now, so that a member of a visible minority could step into their place. I see no volunteers, no doubt because each of them would take the position that he or she has earned the right to be here. Why should they give up their seat to someone else who has not been through the election process? That is exactly what it is like in the real world job marketplace too.

People all across Canada oppose employment equity programs and every MP on the government side should admit that the programs are unfair and discriminatory. At the very least, they should admit that they would not like to see such programs applied to their own MP jobs. They should also agree to put an end to discrimination by refusing, as I do, to approve any grants or job creation programs which make employment equity a condition of the project.

Finally they should show courage and give their constituents true representation in the House by voting against any future employment equity bill.

• (1750)

Ms. Jean Augustine (Parliamentary Secretary to Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the chance to debate this motion. I want to say this loudly for the Canadian public. I am sure those who are watching the debate today or who will be reading *Hansard* will mourn the occasion this member stood in the House to ask the government to immediately end employment equity programs and the inclusion of employment equity requirements on employment or training forms because such requirements encourage candidate selection, et cetera.

What a sad opportunity it is to stand in the House to debunk some of the myths we heard a few minutes ago. The public record presents a completely different picture. It suggests hiring practices have very little to do with ability but a lot to do with discriminatory attitudes toward women, visible minorities, aboriginal people and people with disabilities.

I frankly believe the focus of the debate is on the wrong side. Rather than questioning why we need the employment equity we should be asking: Why do visible minorities, women, aboriginal people and persons with disabilities experience significantly higher rates of unemployment, sometimes twice the national

level, even when they prove themselves to be eminently qualified for jobs? That is the question.

Documents and research tell us these individuals are frequently better educated and trained at proportionately higher levels than the general population to take on work opportunities. In addition to their advanced university degrees, they often come equipped with special knowledge or personal attributes that can also contribute to the job.

Let us look at it from a strictly pragmatic, business perspective. Visible minority members, for example, may be immigrants from other parts of the world. They bring with them firsthand knowledge of foreign market conditions which may be invaluable to Canadian exporters.

We heard quite a few businesses cited and we heard some misinformation given in terms of statistics. Women who make up more than half the population know better than anyone the needs of Canadian consumers, their families and themselves. Aboriginal people have a wealth of experience in traditional approaches to a multitude of disciplines, from the earth sciences to holistic healing to dispute resolution. With advanced education they are well positioned to marry traditions with the best of the contemporary economy.

Who better than persons with disabilities to offer insights into the specialized needs of people who are physically or intellectually challenged, one of the growth markets of the next century.

The member across the way threw out a case study. In that diatribe we were subjected to, the member mixed so many things together, the apples and the oranges and the myths. Too many employers continue to erect barriers to employment of these talented, work-ready people.

We can take statistics from Max Yalden, the Canadian human rights commissioner. He has publicly stated his concern about a growing mean-spirited attitude in Canada. He has warned of a backlash against members of society's most vulnerable groups by critics that claim they enjoy special workplace and hiring advantages. The statistics clearly show nothing could be further from the truth.

Mr. Yalden noted that while white male Canadians make up just 45 per cent of the workforce, they account for 55 per cent of all hirings. Men constitute nearly 95 per cent of corporate board members and more than 90 per cent of senior managers. They also earn an average of 20 per cent more than female workers. A study was recently done and published in the local media.

A study recently completed by Statistics Canada also concluded systemic discrimination explains much of that wage gap. Many women consider themselves lucky just to be hired. Women's share of all hiring declined from 1988 to 1992 and has improved only slightly since then.