

*Private Members' Business*

He said: Mr. Speaker, I have the honour and the privilege of leading off the debate in this House on a Private Members' Bill which I sponsored and whose purpose is to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act.

As you may know, Mr. Speaker, section 14 of the Act prevents people who are obliged to perform their civic duty, for instance as members of a jury of members of emergency teams, from receiving unemployment insurance benefits if they happen to be unemployed.

I am sure you will agree this is absolutely unfair and that many people are caught in a bind in such cases. Mr. Speaker, I think this section contradicts the intent of the Unemployment Insurance Act. This legislation was passed more than 50 years ago to provide income security for all Canadians, not to punish them when they have to perform their civic duty.

[English]

The object of Bill C-211 is to amend section 14 of the Unemployment Insurance Act to ensure that persons in temporary service to the community, as jurors or emergency workers, are not regarded as disqualified from a benefit merely because of their participation in such an activity.

At present, anyone performing their civic duty while collecting unemployment insurance benefits is penalized by the federal government for no valid or obvious reason. Anyone performing jury duty for more than two days will not be eligible for benefits since the law considers that they are not available for work. Although jurors are usually granted a stipend for expenses incurred while performing their duties, anyone submitting unemployment insurance claim cards to receive the difference in UI benefits will receive nothing. I guess to explain it a little better I will refer back to an individual case in my riding that I am quite well aware of that made the media quite extensively in Atlantic Canada. It came to my attention because it involved a constituent of mine.

At that time that I was referred to this case I thought it was a misunderstanding and so did the person in question. We came to find out that the regulation is in fact there. The best way of explaining it, Mr. Speaker, is to read this letter which I received from my constituent that

she also forwarded to members of the media in the form of a letter to the editor. It says:

Dear Sir,

In September I experienced the luck of having been laid off after paying maximum unemployment insurance premiums for the past 25 years.

In November I experienced the luck of having been selected as a juror for the murder trial recently held in Campbellton. The mental stress of trying to absorb nine days of testimony and summations was emotionally draining.

The added stress I would also assume is that she was on unemployment insurance benefits, or so she thought and obviously at a reduced salary with no work and not able to look for work.

I am sure that if she knew she was not eligible for UI, her stress level would probably have been that much higher. I quote again from her letter:

At the conclusion of the trial I requested and was given a letter which stated the days I had been present in court and the amount of money that I would receive from the court. I mailed this letter along with the UI card on November 27.

In December I received a letter from the Unemployment Insurance Commission informing me that I was disqualified from unemployment insurance benefits for the two weeks in question as I had not been available for work.

I immediately telephoned the letter-writer to register my disbelief only to be told that I had not been available for work and that there were no exceptions for jurors.

She goes on to state:

My tax money helped pay the salaries of the participants in this case, including the RCMP, the prosecution staff, the public defender, the sheriff's department, the court staff, and not to mention the room and board of the prisoner in question.

In retrospect I could have ignored the summons to appear for jury selection and I would have been fined \$50 like the dozen or so other good citizens who failed to show up. I could have requested a letter to be sent to the court by a sympathetic doctor exempting me. I could have lied and said I knew someone connected to the case. I could have lied on my UI claim. Someone suggested that anyone showing up for jury selection with a rope thrown over her shoulder would probably be rejected by the defence team.

However, I did none of these things. I tried to be a good citizen, but I have come to the conclusion that when dealing with big brother honesty is really not the best policy.

That puts it in a nutshell, Mr. Speaker. Basically the person was on UI, was receiving benefits after being laid off employment, and did her civic duty by appearing on the jury.