

• (4:40 p.m.)

[English]

Mr. Melvin McQuaid (Kings): Mr. Speaker, let me begin by saying that I believe this amending legislation will undoubtedly please the majority of Canadian workers. So far as I know this is the first time in nine years that an amendment has been introduced to the Unemployment Insurance Act resulting in increased benefits to employees. This, of course, is only as it should be because of the increase in the cost of living during the last number of years.

However, having said that I feel that at this time I must voice some severe criticism with respect to the operations of some of our unemployment insurance offices. I am highly critical of any program designed to close regional offices throughout this country which up to this time have performed very valuable services for those people who have been obliged to apply for unemployment insurance benefits. I have had examples brought to my attention of people who were unemployed, in need of benefits, entitled to receive benefits and who applied on the sixteenth of December but had not received one cheque by the seventh of February. I suggest this is nothing short of criminal because these people needed the money.

Up until the time the change was introduced by the commission, people were getting their money on time. However, by reason of the fact that the commission decided to close regional offices these delays have been taking place. The minister has attempted, in reply to the hon. member for Simcoe East (Mr. Rynd), to avoid responsibility for the closing of these offices. To what point is our parliamentary system drifting, Mr. Speaker? Surely the minister cannot come in here and disclaim responsibility to parliament for the closing of these offices. He is the man who is in charge of the Unemployment Insurance Commission.

Mr. Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, rising on a question of privilege, may I say that I am sure the hon. member would not want a statement of that kind to go unchallenged on the record. Has he read the act? The minister has no responsibility for the operations of the commission. I make that statement unequivocally. Parliament has allocated the responsibility to the commission. I am sure the hon. member would not want a statement such as he has made to go without correction, if such is not the case.

Unemployment Insurance Act

Mr. McQuaid: I believe it goes without saying that it is the minister who answers to parliament for the operation of the Unemployment Insurance Commission. I ask the minister through you, Mr. Speaker, why, when a complaint was filed with him with regard to the closing of one of these regional offices, did he answer that complaint not as Minister of Labour but simply as "John R. Nicholson"? The letter was written on the letterhead of the Unemployment Insurance Commission. He did not reply to this complaint as Minister of Labour; he replied to it on the letterhead of the Unemployment Insurance Commission and signed not as Minister of Labour but as John R. Nicholson.

I have here a letter written on May 31, 1967, by the minister to the president of the Summerside board of trade. The board complained, and I suggest rightly so, about the closing of the regional unemployment insurance office in Summerside. We now only have one regional office for the whole province of Prince Edward Island. Does the minister suggest that those who are required to draw unemployment insurance benefits can be effectively served by one office in a province? Does he realize that people who have to file unemployment insurance claims or have business to conduct with the Unemployment Insurance Commission, and who live in the western end of Prince Edward Island, have to travel 150 miles to get to the nearest regional office? Does this make for efficiency? How can the minister possibly justify the closing of that office?

This matter was raised with him by the board of trade and he answered, as I say, on the letterhead of the Unemployment Insurance Commission on May 31, 1967. The following is the explanation the minister gave, and I am quoting directly from the letter:

The commission is in the process of consolidating and centralizing its operations and has already discontinued its activities in many areas and transferred its operations to other localities.

This is true, Mr. Speaker, but that is not an explanation for the closing of an office when the nearest office is then 150 miles away. The letter continues:

The commission is no longer responsible for the administration of the National Employment Service and the need for local offices is considerably reduced as mail service can be used extensively to carry out its operations.

I suggest that mail service cannot be used effectively by all those people who want to