

*Unemployment Insurance Act*  
**AFTER RECESS**

The House met at 8 p.m.

**Mr. Speaker:** The question is on motion no. 7 which, for the purpose of discussion, has been grouped together with motions nos. 8, 14 and 15, and it stands in the name of the hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander).

**Mr. Alexander:** Mr. Speaker, when I called it six o'clock I was trying to bring home to the government as vividly as possible the error of its ways in respect of the amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act which deal primarily with fighting the high cost of unemployment insurance on the backs of the poor.

I attempted to indicate that the reason the bill stands as it does is that the government, back in 1971, had some compassionate feeling for those faced with the high cost of food, shelter, and clothing. At the time the government felt that if a person had a family or dependants that person should be recognized as such. Now, as I stated earlier, it seems that the government is taking from the poor in order to give to those who are pregnant.

The government's reasoning now seems to be that it does not want the scheme to be a welfare scheme and is trying to move in the direction of a pure unemployment insurance plan or an insurance scheme. Let me point out that so far as this principle of unemployment insurance is concerned, it is destroyed once the government moves in the direction of recognizing pregnancy as a sickness for the purpose of the plan. It is interesting to note that the government did not move in this regard in violation of the principle, but rather in favour of pregnancy, making coverage even more flexible. It seems to me there is an undue amount of hardship being placed on those who are at the bottom of the economic ladder, at this particular time of high inflation and high cost of living, making these people feel the pinch even more.

What is even more strange is that the clause, as I understand it, subject to check by the minister in his usual style, is talking about \$5 per person. This is the type of saving the government anticipates when it is referring to savings of some \$30 million.

I was impressed by one or two briefs that were presented to the Standing Committee on Labour, Manpower and Immigration when it dealt with the bill clause by clause. We heard from the Council on Social Development, represented by Mr. Reuben Baetz, and we also heard from the Canadian Labour Congress and the Canadian Manufacturers' Association. I express my appreciation to those people for having taken part in what I felt at the time, and now know, was a very significant debate.

Let me read just one part of the brief of the Canadian Labour Congress. I realize I may be repetitious in this regard, but I want hon. members to know how concerned this group is about the moves the government is engaged in at this particular time. The brief states in part:

In a time of rapidly rising prices it is inconceivable for the government to remove this protective clause from low income earners who are struggling to maintain themselves and their families. The loss of 25 per cent of their original earnings is bad enough without the government knocking them even further down the economic ladder.

[Mr. Deputy Speaker.]

It seems to me the government is attempting to achieve restraint by taking \$5 per week from these unemployed with dependants' earnings at a maximum of \$3,200 per year only. That is when the circumstances are the most dire and the recipient could most use the money. In light of the fact that the new principle of unemployment insurance has been destroyed in any event by the government recognizing that sickness and pregnancy benefits should form part of unemployment insurance, then it seems to me that it is morally wrong at this time to remove this very small bit of protection for those who are with family, if you like, and who are counting on this amount of \$5 a week.

● (2010)

In conclusion I would state it is wrong for the government to take from the poor—I do not say this lightly—and give to prisoners in order to bring about a facade in terms of amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act. These small reforms dealing with the aged and the poor mean nothing whatever. What should occur is that the government should move in an area whereby it can initiate policies that would bring about a satisfactory employment level. We will get into that later when it proposes to move the bench mark up to 5.6 per cent on an eight-year moving average.

This is where the government must move if it wants to make money. It must bring down the interest rate and bring down the eligibility period whereby someone can become eligible for unemployment insurance after being involved in the work force for a period of eight weeks. The minister should direct his attention to this particular clause. The fact is that after being in the work force for eight weeks one can continue for a period of 40-odd weeks as a recipient of unemployment insurance. Surely if the minister wants to do something for the Canadian people he should direct his attention to those two areas. He should convince his colleagues on the front bench to bring about a meaningful policy to reduce unemployment and, second, to move in on the eligibility period. Then I am sure he would get all the support required on this side of the House.

In the meantime I would ask the minister to pay particular attention to the speakers who will follow me in this regard because I am sure I speak for not only those on this side of the House but for many of my other colleagues who, for one reason or another, will not stand up and give voice, or be counted as my hon. friend says.

**Mr. John Rodriguez (Nickel Belt):** Mr. Speaker, once again we witness an attempt on the part of the government to embark upon restraint. Once more we embark on restraint. Earlier today we saw the initial move toward restraint. Who was the government restraining then? It was restraining those people 65 years of age or over, eliminating them from benefits under the Unemployment Insurance Act. Now we find another group being restrained. One would think that perhaps this is a very powerful group. We find it is a group of Canadians who, through no fault of their own, have become unemployed. We should ask ourselves what group it is which receives the extended benefits and the dependency rate under the Unemployment Insurance Act. Is this group composed of those who have