

*Adjournment Debate*MANPOWER—LAY-OFFS AT LABRADOR LINERBOARD MILL—
GOVERNMENT ACTION TO ALLEVIATE EFFECTS

Mr. Jack Marshall (Humber-St. George's-St. Barbe): Mr. Speaker, I am sure the many members who are here tonight are aware of the number of times I have raised this serious problem which has arisen in my district as a result of the closure of the Labrador linerboard mill. I raise it again tonight because the situation is worsening. It is worsening because I cannot seem to get anyone on the government side to realize that there are other industries which were dependent to a great extent on the mill and that they should be protected. They should be monitored before they fall by the wayside.

Not only are the service industries suffering, but there is now a serious effect on the retail stores and other small businesses in that thriving community. It is vitally important that, rather than accept the shock that came about as a result of the closure of the mill—and the government accepts it laying down waiting for the problem to resolve itself—increased efforts should be directed toward these small businesses which are now feeling the effects of a depressed economy.

The Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mr. Cullen) indicated the type of assistance that has been given by way of mobility grants and retraining programs. While it is appreciated, it does not solve the problem which exists. In a way it tends to contradict the objectives we should be trying to reach.

Mobility funds are fine, but the workers in Stephenville and the surrounding area want to stay at home. Many have built expensive homes and have established roots. They now have to pull up stakes. In many cases families will be broken up. Homes built at inflated prices will now have to be sold at a loss. Many are mortgaged and have high monthly payments which these people cannot afford.

The retraining assistance is also appreciated, but for what are these people being retrained? They are being retrained for jobs that do not exist. My district has the highest rate of unemployment in all of Canada.

Another feature of the efforts of Manpower which the minister mentioned is the financial assistance available under the emergency response feature of the Canada Works Program. However, he indicated it is premature to apply for assistance because the employees are receiving severance pay. The minister is wrong on two counts.

First, the majority of the workers did not receive severance pay, or only received a small percentage of it. Second, the minister is wrong in expressing the attitude of leaving the matter until it becomes an emergency instead of having a contingency plan in place now. What is required is what I suggested almost a year ago, a year before the mill closed. There was every opportunity to make plans, but my warnings went unheeded. It has been obvious for the past two years that the mill was ready to close and was being kept in operation only by the continuing attempt of the provincial government to save, at great cost, the jobs involved.

[The Acting Speaker (Mr. Turner).]

● (2222)

The government had at its disposal every means to save the situation. The extensive area surrounding the mill, which is situated in the Harmon complex, was the location of a massive strategic air base left to the province by the United States together with many millions of dollars worth of facilities of every type suitable for the establishment of appropriate agencies of government. There was, as I suggested last year, plenty of opportunity to decentralize those agencies.

Let me mention some which I had in mind. They included the establishment of a marine training centre, the establishment of a segment of the air search and rescue operation, the establishment of a segment of the coast guard college and of a segment of the fisheries college. What a blow it was when, after a meeting on the spot in which government representatives had expressed their concern about the situation, the government failed to take any action to move a single agency to the area. I would point out, Mr. Speaker, that the meeting to which I have referred took place only one week before the announcement of the government's great decentralization program.

Time does not permit me to describe the advantages of such moves as I have suggested, moves which could have been made at little cost to the treasury. I can only appeal to the minister, through his parliamentary secretary and through his colleagues, to look at this whole question again with a determination to give sympathetic consideration to the needs of the small industries which still exist in the area and which are doing their best against every sort of handicap. Special consideration should be given to such industries when determining the help which can be extended through the various programs the government talks about in connection with small business.

I appeal to the parliamentary secretary to try to understand the consequences of the destruction of an industry in circumstances which I tried to bring to his attention in a reasonable way, not in the way some have approached him following the closing down of other industries. I trust the government will do everything it can to help a community in which the unemployment rate is so high and the state of the economy is so depressed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Dupont (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Employment and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, as all hon. members know, department officials went to work as soon as the announcement of that lay-off reached them in April 1977. Indeed, in late April and early May the officers of our Manpower Consultative Service met on various occasions with management and union delegates as well as the representatives of the provincial Department of Manpower and Industrial Relations. Those meetings enabled the parties involved to reach on behalf of the affected workers a first agreement to promote manpower studies on May 9, 1977, to which a final agreement was added in September 1977. Under the guidelines of the Manpower Consultative Service, management and