

Unemployment Insurance Act

It is unfair and regrettable that insurance officers and those who administer the act place applicants, by design or otherwise, in a position where they are denied the benefits to which they are entitled. We have raised this matter a number of times and we are raising it again. It has been spoken of by members of all parties in the house, and hon. members received assurances from the minister's predecessor that something would be done about it.

When the minister was introducing a bill to alter the act I think he could also have covered this aspect along with other aspects that have been complained of. There has been a failure by government to take action, not by the present minister alone but by the ministers of labour generally who have known about this situation and other anomalies in the act and have allowed them to go on uncorrected. No reasonable solution has been suggested to parliament as to what ought to be done. The closest we came to a solution was when the Minister of National Health and Welfare said the other day when moving second reading: "Well, we are going to change the act generally but at some time in the future; we are studying it carefully." This is not good enough. It may be acceptable to those members of cabinet who like to dally and procrastinate on serious problems but the answer is not good enough for the people of this nation who are denied their fair rights under this act.

We live in a computer age and we all have a social insurance number. My friend from Winnipeg North Centre calls it the "sin" number. Somewhere in the government's files we are all listed numerically. Anybody who has such a number can quickly be pinpointed by government officials. I am sure it would be cheaper and more efficient to use computers in such a way that a person's unemployment insurance contributions could be determined instantly. A computer could determine just how much has been paid in and whether a person has made sufficient contributions to be eligible for benefits.

The people of northern British Columbia, particularly in the logging industry, must use the mail service. They do not live near an unemployment insurance office and they must do business by mail. I know of cases in which there has been extended correspondence between claimants and unemployment insurance offices. The gist of the correspondence from the unemployment insurance office is: We are sorry but we did not know you

worked for this employer, we have not got your book back, where are your stamps? The individual has not got his book; his employer has it. Or it is in somebody's office or it has been sent from Prince Rupert to Vancouver to allow somebody else to look at it. And in this whole mess of administrative bureaucracy the individual claimant is unable to receive what he justifiably considers his rightful benefit under the act. He is denied that benefit week after week after week because somebody, somewhere, has goofed.

● (3:50 p.m.)

The minister knows this to be the case. Anyone who has had any relationship with the unemployment insurance structure, particularly through the mail, knows that something is wrong. The operation has been in existence for some 25 years now but it is still in an accounting mess. Surely some mechanism could be developed by means of which officials could make use of a computer somewhere and get information as to the amount of the contribution an individual has made without the necessity of resorting to lengthy correspondence and telephone calls to employers scattered across the country, as well as to various sections of the insurance set-up, in an attempt to find out why an individual is being denied what is rightfully his, namely, the opportunity to collect unemployment insurance benefits at the time he needs them, that is, when he is out of work. Surely it is not right that a month or two months should go by before somebody gets the record straightened out and authority is obtained for payments to be made.

Let me say in closing that the bill before the house is certainly acceptable. I am sure no one will object to its substance. But it leaves a great deal to be desired because it is just piddling around the edges of a system which is not applicable to present day requirements. It is most regrettable that after all the studies which have been made throughout the years, after all the application of the abilities of the minister and his predecessor with respect to unemployment insurance, the amendments should do nothing to touch the basic problems which face us.

Mr. P. B. Rynard (Simcoe East): Mr. Speaker, I should like to remind the minister that I have had a great deal of correspondence with him on the question of the closing of unemployment insurance offices across Canada and about the wisdom of the government in following this course. I have also talked to the