

Maternity Benefits

has the effect of making women who apply for maternity benefits work longer than other people.

In this bill we are proposing to delete part of section 30(2) so that maternity benefits can be claimed at any time once the person qualifies. At the present time, Mr. Speaker, a woman can only claim maternity benefits during the first 15 weeks of the initial benefit period. This means that if she had already collected ten weeks of benefits in the preceding 12 months, because she was sick or lost her job, she could only collect five weeks of maternity benefits. Therefore the aim of this bill is that maternity benefits should not be reduced because a woman has collected benefits for other reasons. Other reasons are in a different category. Maternity benefits ought not to be touched by benefits received for other reasons.

Bill C-205 proposes to delete section 46 so that pregnant women who are not eligible for maternity benefits can collect regular benefits. At the present time the law says that women do not qualify for maternity benefits, even though they have worked 20 weeks and cannot collect regular benefits in a period which starts eight weeks before the expected date of delivery and ends six weeks after the birth of the child. For a period of 15 weeks these women get nothing, even if they are out looking for a job and even if, under other circumstances, they would be collecting unemployment insurance. On the part of the state I submit, therefore, that there is an arbitrary and somehow inflexible assumption of the period during which women are not available or capable of work. I submit that is not a decision for the state to make.

Bill C-205 also proposes to amend section 25 so that regular benefits are available for pregnant women who are not eligible for maternity benefits but who do meet the regional requirements which may be, in some parts of Canada, less than 20 weeks. This amendment would complement the removal of section 46, to which I made reference a moment ago, by ensuring that the woman is not prevented from collecting regular benefits in the 15-week period around the birth of her child, and that she will be eligible for regular benefits if she is unable to work because of pregnancy and has contributed to the fund for the number of weeks required in her region, like everyone else, if it is less than 20 weeks.

This bill proposes to bring in line our Unemployment Insurance Act with the recommendations made by the Human Rights Commission in recent times. Hon. members may be familiar with the case of Stella Bliss who was not able to obtain maternity benefits because of what is called in the departmental jargon in Ottawa "the magic 10 rule". She was disentitled from regular employment benefits even though she was capable of work and had a major attachment as a claimant. She claimed this was discrimination on the basis of sex. The Supreme Court of Canada did not agree that discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy was discrimination on the grounds of sex, and therefore her appeal was disallowed.

● (1630)

The Human Rights Commission said that the case of Stella Bliss illustrates that women can suffer economic penalties if they attempt to combine the social roles of work and child-bearing, both, of course, a necessary and valuable contribution in the development of our country. In pursuing the idea of Bill C-205, namely, that of equal access to unemployment insurance benefits, one inevitably has to ask what would be an ideal period for coverage of women in the labour force who are pregnant and have a child before this type of economic support comes to an end.

The present period of coverage is far too short. At the same time it is extremely difficult to obtain an indication of what would be an adequate period of time. Some feel the coverage should be extended to two, three or even four years. It would say the first step would be to amend the act so as to provide a maternity benefit of six months. This would be an increase of 11 weeks on the existing 15.

Some may ask why this should be done. Perhaps we ought to look at this matter from the point of view of the child as much as from the point of view of the mother and what benefits are derived for society as a whole. If we were to increase the benefit period to six months, we would have an investment in the future of our society, the future generations. The happier the child is, the fewer problems he will have later on which fall into the category of juvenile delinquency, need for institutional care, and behaviour of adults that sometimes degenerates to what we learn from the headlines.

It must be clear that every step along this path is addressing itself to and is meant for women who need help most. In this country there is an increasing number of women entering the labour force and an increasing number of single parents. The women we think of with regard to this bill are not those with the glamorous jobs. After a pregnancy, they would not go back to a terrific job. They would go back to factory jobs, clerical, assembly line or cleaning jobs, mostly in our cities.

These women have to bundle up their children between six and seven in the morning, winter and summer. They must take the subway in order to get the child to a day nursery in another place. The child is left there, picked up at the end of the day, and contact is again re-established with the child.

These situations are increasing in number and are more and more typical of our industrial society. The emphasis must be in considering the mother and the child. Last week in this House the report was submitted by the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child. I would like to put on record two quotations from that report because they seem to be helpful for the consideration of the government once it moves in this direction.

One thought in that report indicates that benefits should follow the child. Distinction should not be made between male and female parents when considering those benefits which provide for the care and nurturing of a child. In other words, the main stress or concern ought to keep in mind the interest