

bill. I challenge them to kill the bill. I for one will not accept those amendments. I am quite comfortable with Bill C-21. I am ready and willing, as I have been on many occasions during the last two months, to go to my province and explain the nature and the wisdom of this legislation.

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

Hon. Joyce Fairbairn: Honourable senators, I want to take part in this debate today to indicate my strongest support for the amendment to Bill C-21 that would ensure that unemployed Canadian workers may collect unemployment insurance benefits while taking basic skills and literacy courses as a bridge to qualifying for job training. This may be an amendment that has been overshadowed by others, so I would simply draw to senators' attention that it is on page 21 of the final report and is also listed as No. 1 of Appendix A.

At the start, even at this late hour, I would like to thank all of the members of the special committee who studied this controversial piece of legislation for the thorough work that they have done. They have followed a course which, in my view, is a fine example of what is expected of today's Senate. They heard an enormous number of witnesses in a very short time, and, more important, I think the speeches today have indicated that they listened to what those witnesses had to say.

The senators on the committee also showed a special sensitivity in responding to disturbing events in Atlantic Canada by travelling to areas where workers will be most directly affected by reduced fishing quotas and severe cutbacks and closures in fish plants, particularly in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. For the rest of Canadians, the visits of these senators have helped to put a human face on a complex and difficult piece of legislation. Through what I believe to be very carefully considered amendments, senators on the committee have provided this house and the government with reasonable and positive options for change. Whatever the climate was some nine months ago, when this bill was first introduced in the House of Commons, it is now one of great uncertainty, stress and even disaster for workers in various parts of Canada.

In the past year we have seen a steadily proliferating spate of plant closures, of mine shutdowns, of layoffs, and of restructuring throughout the business and industrial sectors. The numbers have piled up, whether because of the general economic change or pressure or, in some cases, as a result of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. One could, perhaps, dismiss these statistics with some regret and work out a set of balancing figures to show that, while some plants and businesses went down, others started up and new jobs were created. However, thanks to our colleagues on the special committee, in St. John's, Newfoundland, and in the town of Canso, Cape Breton, those statistics became people—men and women with families who depend on them, men and women who have worked in a hard life with skills especially developed for their jobs. For many it is a type of life followed generation by generation in their families. It is what they know how to do and they do it well. Now many of them are facing not just the prospect of losing their jobs but also the prospect of having none to replace them.

This is not just a question of the Atlantic fishery. There are other examples, such as mine shutdowns in northern Ontario and in British Columbia, farmers leaving the land across the Prairies—it is happening in many parts of this country where people simply cannot go down the street or over to the next town to find a new job. You cannot simply be trained and retrained for work that does not exist and then be expected to move someplace else where you may or may not be able to afford to take your family or to live a decent life.

Honourable senators, there are other workers who face a more dismal prospect than that, and it is to them that this particular amendment is directed. They cannot be trained or retrained. They do not qualify for training. They cannot do it. They cannot learn it—not yet. They are among the five million Canadians who are functionally illiterate—some one-quarter of our adult population from the age of 18 upwards. They are among the one in six workers who cannot read and write sufficiently to be able to accomplish what we consider to be everyday routine activities. They are people who have been quite capable of doing their jobs and providing for their families, because they do have special skills. But they do not have sufficient basic skills to give them the flexibility to move around, to shift employment, to learn computers, or to find another path on which to rebuild their lives in this age of technological communications. For instance, the government has often presented entrepreneurship as the star-spangled alternative to looking for a job with somebody else. But how can individuals without basic reading or writing or math skills hope to start successful businesses, particularly in parts of the country where no business base exists to begin with? It is not much of an alternative.

Therefore, we are back to the training option. Not only do these Canadians of which I am speaking lack the basics to be retrained, they also lack the number of grades completed in our school system even to qualify for training programs. It was put most graphically a few weeks ago by a fisherman in Newfoundland, when the true dimension of the fishery crisis became known. He was a man with a young family. He stared into the television camera, which took his image across the nation, and he said: "I cannot read." He never needed to know how to read. He needed to know how to fish. He had no hope of taking advantage of the training which has been talked about so freely. And he is not alone. Many of the most productive workers in Newfoundland have never needed to know how to read. The functionally illiterate rate in that province is 44 per cent—the highest in Canada.

• (1740)

What do they do? The first hurdle is to have the courage to acknowledge publicly that they lack these particular skills which are in such fundamental demand for most other forms of employment all across Canada. That is not an easy thing to do.

Earlier Senator MacEachen was trying to get us, in our comfortable positions, to feel what it would be like to walk into an employment centre and say, "I need a job. I want to work." Imagine, honourable senators, if you not only had to walk into