

Madam Speaker, it is interesting to bear in mind that over 2.1 per cent of the gross national product in Canada is made up of unemployment insurance benefits. You will agree with me to what extent unemployment insurance benefits have a stabilizing effect on the income level and growth of the Canadian people in the Maritimes, in the North, in all areas of this country with different climatic conditions from one season to another.

Indeed, Madam Speaker, it must be known and kept in mind that unemployment benefits are not intended only as income support for claimants, they are also designed to maintain a decent income level within a community, to maintain, for example, within a particular community the level of public expenditures, the level of consumer expenditures, the level of rents, the level of owner expenditures at an acceptable rate.

And that is why, Madam Speaker, in the present situation, even with an excessively high rate of unemployment exceeding 7 per cent, and my colleagues referred to it this afternoon, that is why, Madam Speaker, in countries as important as the United States where there are more than eight million jobless, that is why also in countries like Japan, western countries like Great Britain, France, where the total number of unemployed now exceeds 14 million, in those countries there is no social unrest similar to that we experienced during the thirties or even similar to that Germany experienced, for example, during the twenties.

Unemployment benefits and unemployment insurance indeed play a significant stabilizing part in every industrialised nation, a stabilizing part which affects not only the economy but social life as well. And I believe that in discussing amendments to unemployment insurance it is essential to bear in mind their possible impact on the social atmosphere.

Of course, Madam Speaker, the plan in force since 1935 has been extensively overhauled. The law enacted in 1971, in particular, provided for automatic and annual equalization between premium rates and amounts of insurable earnings. Each year, therefore, the amount of insurable earnings of each Canadian worker and the premium he must contribute to the plan and to the unemployment insurance account are continually readjusted.

Madam Speaker, looking at those amendments which are before us today, I think we should be pleased to see that to a certain extent the minister and the government are conscious of their responsibility in continuously improving the unemployment insurance scheme. And before I comment on some of the proposed amendments which raise more questions than others, I think it is essential that I should repeat that at least three of them tend to achieve a balance which will prove beneficial to the entire system.

The first of these wise and desirable amendments, in my opinion, concerns the payment of travelling expenses incurred by a claimant or his representative when they have to appear before the board of referees. My honorable colleagues have mentioned and shown most convincingly how difficult it is in many instances for a worker to appear before a board of referees. If, on top of having to prove his case, the claimant has to pay for expenses incurred by his representative, I think there is an anomaly which should be corrected. As a matter of fact, in civil as well as criminal cases, some of the expenses of the parties

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who manage to prove their case are assumed by the court and by the departments of Justice.

Madam Speaker, I think in this instance, it is quite logical for the Unemployment Insurance Commission to pay for the expenses of the claimant or his representative, whether he be a lawyer, a union representative or even a member of parliament as in the case of the hon. member for Lotbinière. And I think it should be stressed that this amendment brings into the system an element of fairness which we all welcome.

The second amendment which, in our opinion, also relates to the desire for a balanced income, is the one which deals with qualification for benefits for a supplementary period of 104 weeks. Many Canadian workers find themselves in situations which disqualify or would disqualify them because they cannot complete that 104-week period. For instance, someone who must serve a jail sentence, who is temporarily disabled or who for various reasons, sickness or quarantine, must stay away from his job. I think that the amendment designed to complete that 104-week period restores the balance and the justice we wish to see in the system.

There are also more specific details in the definition of some terms that will also restore the balance. For instance, the definition and the details of the expression "suitable employment", the extension of benefit period in case of sickness and the authorization for the claimant to withdraw a claim will certainly contribute to restore that basic justice, the natural justice that was lacking during the trial periods of the system since 1971. Obviously, we have not heard the last of it and all the reforms needed are not contained in Bill C-69. It is easy to see for instance that one of the main defects which is not corrected in the bill concerns the consolidation of arbitration awards.

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Having completed law studies, you know as well as I do, Madam Speaker, that one of the judicial guarantees is the knowledge by law officers of decisions rendered by the courts in earlier cases. It is important that workers and insured persons may eventually have access to an office consolidation of arbitration awards. I believe this would bring some uniformity into the plan, because it is realized that counsel, judges and arbitrators may have a different perception, different practices and various degrees of knowledge of the law from one area to the other. I believe it is important to standardize the administration of the Unemployment Insurance Act.

I will not insist on the complexity of the act. Every member in this House knows how many interpretation "unexpectedabilities" must be faced when advising a voter or a citizen that consults us on the act. I believe the first guarantee we should seek to add to this legislation is precisely that of an administrative consolidation of arbitration awards, or at least a data centre on decisions awarded on the most stupid points, the most questioned ones or those that give rise to the largest number of problems with the insured.

A second amendment that should be introduced involves the number of days during which an employee, a worker has not worked at his job but may have returned to some part-time employment. It is realized that these periods of