

Government Orders

entire economic picture in a way that will help to revitalize the Atlantic economy.

Some hon. members have expressed concern that this income assistance program will duplicate the general social assistance programs. Let me assure them that this is not so. This is a program that addresses specific individuals who meet specific criteria within a specific age group. General social assistance programs apply to all citizens and have very different criteria.

As well, this program will not be a disincentive to seek work because it is only one part of a broad range of options under TAGS to help fish plant workers adjust to these drastic changes taking place in their lives. Older workers will be able to participate in the other components under TAGS such as green projects, self-employment assistance, and community opportunity pools and others.

At a federal level TAGS is a joint initiative of human resource development and fisheries and oceans. The two departments are working closely together to implement this program for the benefit of the greatest number of workers affected by the demise of the groundfish industry. Fisheries and oceans is currently consulting with its partners to develop a similar income support program for fishers who would qualify.

An hon. member inquired when the program will start and how long it will last. TAGS came into effect May 16 and eligible workers are entitled to labour adjustment measures and income assistance for a period between two to five years, depending upon their attachment to the groundfish industry.

The provisions made available under Bill C-30 to assist older workers will provide a dignified exit to those unemployed fish plant workers in my riding and elsewhere in Atlantic Canada who, having reached the age of 50, know full well that there are no reasonable opportunities for employment in their communities for them and the only alternative course once their unemployment insurance expires would have been social assistance. This program gives those workers a form of early retirement.

In the meantime it will allow the industry to be rebuilt with the younger people who are coming behind them. At the same time it will provide them with an opportunity to have a dignified exit and to be able to deal with the consequences of this crisis without the additional burden of loss of income and the need in some cases to leave their communities where all of their assets are located.

In closing I encourage hon. members to consider the tremendous hardships being faced by these older fish plant workers and to support Bill C-30 so that the government can give them the assistance they very much deserve during this severe crisis in their lives.

• (1330)

Mr. John Cummins (Delta): Madam Speaker, at second reading of this bill the member opposite who followed me said that he was surprised that there was not unanimous consent for the bill. At the time I was not surprised at his comment because it seemed to me that the government solution for dealing with this crisis has simply been to throw more money at the problem. It has not dealt with the core of the problem which is fewer opportunities or lack of opportunities and alternate employment in eastern Canada. That really is the core of the problem.

The solution that the government has proposed simply creates a dependency rather than independence among people in eastern Canada. It destroys families rather than saving them. It does not address the needs of Atlantic Canadians in so far as it is a band-aid for a gaping wound. What is needed in Atlantic Canada are jobs, jobs, jobs. Economic diversification is the only way to answer that need.

The government solution it seems has been to create a need for early retirement. That early retirement package has many things wrong with it. It is destructive to the social fabric. We are saying to unemployed workers in eastern Canada: "Here is \$750 or \$1,000 a month. Take the money, go away and don't bother us". It is saying that you as the breadwinner for your family will not be able to provide so the government will provide. The children who are left at home view their father or their mother, the wage earner, simply as someone who goes to the post office once a month to pick up the cheque, not as someone who is contributing. That is not helpful to the family and it is not helpful to us as a nation to create that sort of dependency in one region of the country.

Another problem that the government does not seem to be able to face is the problem that it must in fact encourage development in Atlantic Canada. I find very curious for example the spending of millions of dollars to keep the port of Montreal open year round in an attempt to make it a year-round port when in fact we have year-round ports in eastern Canada in Halifax and Saint John which could do very well with the business.

We have rail lines that are withering in eastern Canada because there is a lack of use, yet those rail lines and the employment that goes with them could be part of the resurgence of the economy of eastern Canada. Somehow we got it mixed up and think that we have to spend this money to keep one port open while at least two others die. All that does is add to the cost, adds to the tax burden and makes it much more difficult for businessmen across this nation to stay in business.

At second reading I raised the issue of a need for clear legislative authority for all parts of the TAGS program. I appreciate that the auditor general and the public accounts committee have already given some consideration to those parts of TAGS coming under the authority of the Department of