

• (2040)

I am pleased that the minister made a small interjection, which was his speech. He said that he could not understand how such a small bill could create so much confrontation, so much debate. That shows that the minister does not really realize how devastating is the bill. I admit that it is a short bill: it has only two clauses. But their effect is devastating inasmuch as the consequences of the two provisions mean the removal of parliamentary control. I see the minister shake his head. The government are not only removing control but at the same time are asking us to give them a blank cheque.

Mr. Andras: No.

Mr. Alexander: I have heard the government say no before. Let hon. members opposite not get confused over advances, appropriations, funds and accounts.

Mr. Baldwin: They don't know the difference.

Mr. Alexander: No, they do not know the difference, though I will be charitable and say that a few may. The government is asking for a blank cheque so far as advances are concerned. They were limited at one time to advances of \$800 million as working capital. This was money put at the disposal of the Unemployment Insurance Commission in the event that the premiums paid by employers and employees were insufficient to carry on on a month to month basis.

Mr. Andras: And what else?

Mr. Alexander: The government said, "Let us put a ceiling on it of \$800 million".

Mr. Andras: But what about the government's share?

Mr. Alexander: When the government brought in these amendments, firstly to remove the ceiling and secondly in an attempt to make legal that which was not legal in the first instance under clause 2 they assumed a tremendous onus to discharge the matter satisfactorily, not only as far as Members of Parliament are concerned but also the people of Canada. Hon. members on this side went to the committee sincerely, hoping, that for some reason or other the government would tell us that the reason they needed to remove the ceiling was so-and-so.

Instead, the reasons we were given were unacceptable; they were the same reasons the government had given for imposing the ceiling in the first place. These reasons stem from 1971, at which time the reasons were satisfactory to the government and should have been satisfactory to us and to the nation. And we bought those reasons, Mr. Speaker. But what we bought was one of the biggest messes this country has ever seen in terms of government expansion. At the same time, the workers attached to the labour force and who are entitled to these payments were not given a break.

The government are now asking us to buy a pig in a poke; we are being asked to give them a blank cheque. I resent this type of thinking. Surely, if someone wants me to buy something they have to give me a price, some sort of figure. Not one member of this House at this time

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knows what this scheme is going to cost during 1973, despite the excruciatingly persistent cross-examination of the officials in committee. Surely the minister should not come to the House with this bill unable to project what the scheme will cost. That fact alone means he is in trouble, at least as far as we on this side are concerned.

I know the government is able to make a projection because it did so with the governor general's warrants. The government between October 5 and February 8 projected two significant amounts; I believe the first warrant was for \$234 million and the second was for \$220 million. This covered a period of four months. We are now asking the government to make a projection for the future, but the government says it cannot be done.

What bothers me when we talk about money is that to this government any sum is just a drop in the bucket. The former minister asked, "What's \$220 million?" and said it was only a drop in the bucket. Amazingly, the same minister said that the people of Canada did not care how much it cost so long as the unemployed got their money. I do not know where he developed this kind of reasoning, because I should like to tell him that the people of Canada do care. Certainly they are concerned about their tax dollars, and rightly so. Whether the government likes it or not, one of our duties is to be the watchdog of the public purse.

I hear one member over there laugh at that. I should like to know what his thinking is with regard to this matter. The role of the opposition is to criticize constructively.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Alexander: That is what I am doing. I am trying to make the government behave.

Mr. Breau: Who supported the bill? You did.

Mr. Alexander: My hon. friend across the way says I supported the bill. If he recalls, we supported the bill on division after such haranguing and harassing in terms of bringing in meaningful amendments. I will tell him about one right now, and that was the eight weeks attachment to the labour force. Why does the hon. member not talk about the amendments that we tried to bring in? There were several and various amendments that we said would make the bill much more acceptable, which would make it a true unemployment insurance bill. For example, we talked about attachment to the work force. Now the government is being subjected to all kinds of criticism.

Mr. Andras: This is only a short bill, you know.

Mr. Alexander: The minister had his opportunity to make a speech. His great contribution tonight now seems to be to try to interject, to talk about amendments that his government did not accept, and did not accept for reasons which even now I cannot accept. It seems to me that anything the government says about the bill just cannot be believed. What they said previously could not be believed; time has shown that. The government has given us no reasons for believing them now. I agree it is a short bill, but the minister does not understand why we are talking about it. We are talking about it because we were sent here to talk about it. I recall that during the last