

Government Orders

I called these people in our employment centres and I asked the officers: Did the people who were given a penalty of between 7 and 12 weeks last year, and I am referring to people who did not meet their criteria abuse the system? Did they just want to put their feet up on the stove and let the government support them? Did they do it just because they felt like going hunting or fishing? Did they say: "It is no big deal, I quit my job and I only have a penalty of 7 to 12 weeks, which is not as bad as all that". Or were they people who had other reasons, what we refer to as extenuating circumstances?

They all answered: "No, Mr. Blackburn, they are not abusers. Only a tiny minority are abusers. These are people who quit their jobs and did not meet the five basic criteria, but there were extenuating circumstances, which is why we applied penalties of between 7 and 12 weeks". They also said that they very seldom imposed a penalty of 12 weeks, which is done only in really questionable cases.

Mr. Speaker, you will understand that under the circumstances I am caught between the party line and my constituents in Jonquière with my own knowledge of this legislation, especially since I travelled across Canada when we introduced unemployment insurance reform with Bill C-21.

Our colleague, the Minister of Employment and Immigration, has tried to improve things. There are a number of improvements in the bill, including provisions on sexual harassment, such as the fact that these cases will be dealt with *in camera*. The provision dealing with massive lay-offs which ensure these people can receive unemployment insurance is also a very good measure.

I asked the minister whether we could include "other reasonable circumstances" in the bill, to cover people who do not meet the criteria. The minister responded by adding eight more items that were already covered under UI case law. So I went to my officers in the employment centres and I asked whether adding eight items meant that these people would not be considered as having quit voluntarily, and there would be no penalty. They told me: "Mr. Blackburn, that was already the case. When making a decision, we would consider the five criteria and case law as well. The minister is merely clarifying the legislation". That is fine. I am all for clarification. Unfortunately, it still means that last year's 225,000 still

do not meet the criteria according to what I was told by officers in the employment centres in the region.

This evening there will be a vote on this bill and I want to say to the Prime Minister, who announced today that he was stepping down, that I have the greatest respect for him. I have the greatest respect for my government but I cannot vote for this bill this evening.

In truth, I cannot ignore what I know. However, I did say to the hon. minister: "If you really want to catch the cheaters, you could always increase the penalties. I am ready to approve an increase from 9 to 12 weeks. If someone is caught a second time, you will know you are dealing with a cheater and then you can cut off his UI benefits".

I put forward a series of measures to improve the act. I did what I could, but I respect my colleagues who do not share my views. I have no problem with that. However, in turn, I would ask my colleagues to accept the fact that I disagree with them because of what I know.

Mr. Speaker, if I may just add that on Monday I told my Whip: "If my government is in a spot because of my vote, I am ready to make the ultimate sacrifice". I did so to show how honest and professional I could be toward my government. However, tonight I have no reason to believe the government is threatened in any way so I will vote according to my beliefs and those of my constituents from Jonquière.

• (1835)

[English]

Mr. George S. Baker (Gander—Grand Falls): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the hon. member for his excellent address to the Chamber and assure him that he is absolutely correct in his interpretation of the law as far as the Unemployment Insurance Act is concerned. I will also point out to him that while investigating the ramifications of this legislation, I came across some cases from his riding of people who were refused unemployment insurance benefits within the past year. They were judged not to have just cause.

I just want to point out to the hon. member in congratulating him for his decision that most of the judges who have listened to some of the cases of his constituents agree with his assessment. In the most recent one that I have from his riding, the judge said in closing: "While I have the utmost sympathy for the claimant and respect for the undoubted sincerity of her