

Government Orders

Mr. Bob Kilger (Stormont—Dundas): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate today on Bill C-113, an act to provide for government expenditure restraint.

The objective of the omnibus bill is to implement the various expenditure restraint provisions which were outlined in the economic statement of the Minister of Finance on December 2, 1992. Included in these measures are several controversial changes to the unemployment insurance program.

I would like to concentrate my remarks on part VI of this bill as it is this section that deals with the proposed changes to the UI program.

Like its predecessor Bill C-21, part VI of Bill C-113 continues the government's attack on UI and unemployed Canadians. Instead of concentrating on the root problems which have led to 1.6 million Canadians being out of work, the government has opted to intensify its assault on the UI program.

As a result of the government's own economic mismanagement, Canadians are witnessing high unemployment rates, plant closures, bankruptcies, lay-offs and downsizing on a scale never before seen since the Great Depression.

Contrary to what the government would like us to believe, Canada is still not out of the grips of the recession. Yet instead of addressing the economic problems of the country, the government is promoting its right wing, Reform Party-driven agenda by attacking UI.

Mr. Speaker, 2.6 million Canadians are on welfare, 3.8 million live below the poverty line and over 2 million rely on food banks. Yet in an almost frenzied state to correct its failure to address the deficit, this government has turned its back on these Canadians and has set its sights on the unemployment insurance program.

The proposed changes to the UI Act contained in Bill C-113 have serious implications for many Canadians. In clause 17 of this bill the UI benefit rate is reduced from 60 per cent to 57 per cent. In addition, clause 18 provides for the disqualification of those who quit their jobs without just cause or are fired due to their own misconduct. Unfortunately there is no clause in Bill C-113 that will do anything to help unemployed Canadians find work.

The city of Cornwall in my riding of Stormont—Dundas has an unemployment rate of over 20 per cent. The plant closures, lay-offs, business bankruptcies and increases to the welfare rolls have become almost commonplace.

The lack of economic leadership from the federal government, the impact from the recession, the previous high interest rate-high dollar policy of the government and the fall-out from excessive taxation including the GST have contributed to the economic disintegration of this border community.

I would like the government to go into Cornwall and tell the people there that the recession is over, that the more than 2,000 jobs lost over the last 20 months will be returning and that while they are waiting they can rely on unemployment insurance to see them through.

Under Bill C-21 workers who lost their jobs obtained less benefit coverage even though they were made to pay more in UI premiums. With Bill C-113 UI benefits will be reduced 3 per cent. Thus we can see the continuation of this government's attack on the UI program, a continuation of the pay more for less Conservative approach to unemployment insurance.

It was not enough for the government to withdraw from contributing to the UI fund while at the same time reducing the benefit period and raising UI premiums. The government now wants to reduce the percentage of benefit unemployed Canadians will receive.

• (1750)

How much further will the Conservatives go? Perhaps they would like to eliminate the UI program altogether.

The government justification for implementing these changes to the UI program are not defensible. The government says that changes are necessary to stop those lazy shiftless Canadians who quit their jobs and expect to be supported by hard-working responsible Canadians.

In listening to the government, you would think every Canadian on UI was on it because they quit their job or were cheating the system and taking it for a free ride. The truth is the government's own estimates indicate that only 6 per cent of UI recipients actually left their jobs without just cause or were fired for misconduct.