

Standing Committee on National Health and Welfare for study. I hope that this bill will not be sent to the Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs. I think the Standing Committee on National Health and Welfare could more appropriately deal with it. I really feel that the time is right for this bill to be sent to that committee.

The federal government should, in my opinion, act as a model for other employers in this regard. Up to this point, only two provinces, British Columbia and New Brunswick, have maternity leave legislation of any kind on their statute books. In private industry only a small fraction of employees are covered by any sort of maternity leave legislation. Of course, when I say that, it will be obvious that Canada lags far behind many countries in this regard. A survey carried out by the federal Department of Labour in 1967 mentioned such countries as France, Britain, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand.

The proposals of this bill represent a considerable advance from the situation now existing in federal government legislation. I should like to reiterate that the bill does not propose merely to cover employees under the Public Service Employment Act. This is a broader proposal than that. It proposes to cover women whose employment comes under federal jurisdiction which means, of course, that the employment need not only be under the Public Service Employment Act; it may also be connected with all forms of federal works, undertakings or enterprises such as transportation, communications, banking, etc. Therefore, it is a much broader bill than the present legislation, and covers more. As I say, the proposals of this bill represent a considerable advance from the situation now existing in federal government legislation. Employees covered by the Public Service Employment Act are allowed to take time off for pregnancy, but they receive no pay during their period of absence. This may be an improvement over being fired outright when they become pregnant, but this unjust condition still exists in many areas of Canadian employment. For example, there was the recent case in Ottawa where the Public Library fired a woman for pregnancy. Being forced to take time off without pay is really being punished for being a woman; it is being punished for becoming pregnant. I cannot see it in any other light. At the very time when the economic needs of a woman are increasing, she is forced to leave her job.

● (5:10 p.m.)

The present situation in the federal service is that an employee must resign at least two months before the birth of her child unless a medical certificate is provided or the agreement of the department concerned is obtained to permit the woman to continue working. The employee must return to work within six months of the birth of her child. This leave is granted without pay. During this time the woman is required to pay both her own share and that of the government toward her superannuation and medical insurance plans. It is hard to believe that this situation exists in our Public Service Employment Act. It is manifestly unjust at the time a woman is laid off that she should have to continue to pay

Maternity Leave Act

both her share and that of the government toward both superannuation and medical insurance plans.

My bill is necessarily limited to cover women whose employment comes under federal jurisdiction. Of all persons under federal jurisdiction 26.5 per cent are women. It is estimated that 36 per cent of these women are between the ages of 20 and 34, which can be roughly classified as the child-bearing years. As far as I can understand this is how they are classified by the Women's Bureau.

In the general work force the participation of women of child-bearing age is increasing. This was shown by a report issued in the last day or two. It is, therefore, entirely likely that such is also the case in those positions under federal jurisdiction.

Thousands of women today have to face the double job of looking after a family and holding a position outside of the home. It might be better if such were not the case. I have no doubt that if they could find alternative sources of income such as a husband, some kind of family allowance or a guaranteed income, many of these women would not be in the labour market. Those who are forced to be there are having a difficult time making their way against customs and social organization which no longer fit in with today's needs and realities.

We, as Members of Parliament, should be doing all that we can to place these women in a position of greater equality to enable them to carry their double burden. After all, it is not their burden alone, but the burden of society. I urge the government to look carefully at these proposals with a view to adopting them or similar proposals to provide adequate maternity leave protection for women employed under federal jurisdiction. If the government is not prepared to do this, then, the least it should do is to have a committee thoroughly study and make recommendations on maternity leave. The time is now ripe, particularly in view of the fact that pregnancy is covered under the Unemployment Insurance Act. The very least we can do is to refer the subject of this bill to the Standing Committee on National Health and Welfare for study and report.

Mr. Jack Cullen (Sarnia-Lambton): Mr. Speaker, it is incumbent upon me to congratulate the hon. member on presenting this bill. I think the male members of this House can also take a pat on the back because we saw fit to leave this bill in its place of priority, notwithstanding the offending section, and allowed the hon. member to delete this section so that the matter could be debated this afternoon.

The attitude concerning women in the work force has undergone considerable change, particularly in the past 10 or 20 years. May I be so bold as to suggest that this change in attitude has been healthy? It is interesting to note that we have moved from ridiculing the suffragette to the present position where a royal commission has been appointed to study the status of women. It is, therefore not surprising that a Member of Parliament should be introducing or suggesting the kind of legislation we are debating today.