

Expedition of Public Services

methods I have ever seen of depriving people of their basic necessities.

Before I go into some of the difficulties which I and other members of parliament have encountered through phone calls and letters from our constituents and calls from newspaper and radio commentators, I want to make it clear that I do not lay the blame mainly on the Unemployment Insurance Commission, on the employees of the commission, many of whom are working long hours of overtime to try to meet the needs and difficulties which are brought to their attention.

The main responsibility for the mess we are in has to be placed on the government, because when the Unemployment Insurance Act was changed the government wanted to improve the benefits people would receive while they were unemployed, but they wanted to do it on the cheap and in order to save money they decided to incorporate in the new act certain provisions which have created most of the difficulties about which people are complaining. First, the waiting period, which was a week before a person could qualify for unemployment insurance benefits, was increased to two weeks. Members of my party who were on the committee which dealt with the bill in detail warned that this would create a great deal of difficulty. Those warnings were ignored and rejected by the government. There is provision in the bill that before a person qualifies for benefits he must use up any statutory holidays pay which he has accumulated. For some people, such as construction workers, this can amount to \$600 or \$800, a substantial sum of money. Averaged out at \$100 a week, a person can wait eight weeks or more before qualifying for unemployment insurance benefits.

• (1540)

I am sure there is not one member of this House on the opposition side or on the government side who has not had daily telephone calls or letters from constituents who have had to wait 8, 10, 12 or 14 weeks before receiving benefits. And this despite the vehement denials of the parliamentary secretary that such is not the case. There is not one member who has not been told of cases where benefits have stopped without explanation. Although very often there is an explanation, because of the complexities of the act the employees of the Unemployment Insurance Commission do not know what the explanation is.

Let me give the House an illustration of what I mean. One of my constituents called me during the Christmas recess. Her husband had had a heart attack in the middle of 1971 and under the provisions of the act he was entitled to receive unemployment insurance benefits. He did receive those benefits for a number of weeks until suddenly, without any notice or explanation, the benefits ceased. This lady told me that since her husband was not well enough to go to the unemployment insurance office, she telephoned the office several times. Usually when one phones the unemployment insurance office one gets the busy signal, but after repeated calls she finally got somebody on the line but could not get an explanation of why her husband's benefits had ceased. She was told she could not know the employee's name so she could not check further into the matter.

[Mr. Orlikow.]

She went down to the office and stood in line for several hours until it was her turn to speak to someone. Even then the office could not give her an explanation, so she called me. I had the advantage of the special telephone number that is available to members of parliament and I called the office. May I just digress for a moment to say to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Manpower and Immigration, who is not here today, that the very fact that there is a special telephone number for members of parliament is an indication of the number of calls that must be made by ordinary claimants. If there were not so many calls and the lines were not so busy for most of the time, there would be no need to give members of parliament and members of the legislatures a special number.

I want to make it clear that the employees handling inquiries made by Members of Parliament at the Winnipeg office are very co-operative, as I am sure they are in most offices. After I had made my inquiry and the clerk had looked into it, she called me back to say that there was a very simple explanation why the benefits had ceased. Under the provisions of the act, a person who falls ill and draws unemployment insurance benefits is entitled to receive benefits for only 15 weeks. If that is the case, then it seems to me it would be a very simple matter to attach to the last cheque mailed to a person receiving benefits under this provision a notice explaining that this was their last cheque since the act only provided payments for 15 weeks. I cannot understand why such a policy is not followed. Neither do I understand why those who work for the Unemployment Insurance Commission do not know the provisions of the act so they can explain to people what is going on. Obviously, the complexity of the act is such that the staff simply do not know its provisions.

Another major problem has arisen as a result of the decision of the Unemployment Insurance Commission, I am certain with the agreement and approval of the government, to computerize the whole operation. I had occasion to talk to one of the top officials in the Department of National Health and Welfare recently who was very intimately involved in the family allowance program. He told me that when it was decided to shift the payment of family allowance cheques to a computer operation, for a number of months until they were certain that the "bugs" in the system had been ironed out duplicate systems were run, the old system under which things were done manually as well as the computerized system. Not so with the Unemployment Insurance Commission; they went straight to a computer operation.

I suppose I have to take the word of the parliamentary secretary that 97 per cent or 98 per cent of the people who file a claim for unemployment insurance benefits have the claim settled and receive payment without difficulty. I shall come back in a moment to the length of time it takes to make these payments, but the usual answer of the government in this regard is to quote statistics. If 3 per cent of the people applying for unemployment insurance run into problems and there are 500,000 or 600,000 applicants for benefits, then we are talking about tens of thousands of people who are having difficulty. This is the real problem we are facing.