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in coming to Ottawa today to present publicly their case as they have. We on this side of the House welcome it very strongly. We as a government provide support for the arts, something which we do out of firm conviction for a variety of reasons. Government support for the arts is not a response to some marginal interest of the public nor a mere frill in government expenditure: it is because these programs respond to deeply felt human needs which it is important for government to deal with.

Our second belief is that Canadian artists in their work, consciously—perhaps sometimes unconsciously—express Canadian response to the Canadian experience within their works. Their efforts are extremely important to this country because they help affirm for us all a sense of Canadian identity.

The third point—a point which, I think, is not often recognized by members of this House—is that support for the arts in Canada is support for an important industry in this country. The investments which we make as governments in this area come back to us in terms of the employment of Canadians and a multiple of economic benefits.

[*Translation*]

I want to indicate, Mr. Speaker, that to us it is not a figment of the imagination. People often talk about cuts in government programs in this area, and it is true that we were concerned about possible future cuts. I must say to the House that there was even an increase for the year 1979-80, a marginal one, I admit, to support the arts. As far as the government is concerned, it is essential that artists in this country are successful in their work, which is important both for the human mind and for us as Canadians. Mr. Speaker, the representatives who are sitting today in the galleries asked—

[*English*]

—for an inquiry, perhaps for a commission, into the future of the arts in this country. We have within the Department of the Secretary of State already begun an examination ourselves of what should be the long-term strategy for government funding in this area. We are determined that our efforts in this area should take place publicly. We will be involving this committee and the Canadian Conference of the Arts in discussing with us how we can most appropriately design an effective policy for the government in the future in this area.

Mr. Speaker: Is the House ready for the question? There are a number of other members who seek the floor. I have no authority to give them the floor at this moment. The question period is to begin at this time, and Standing Orders make it clear that we must interrupt this debate to begin the question period.

An hon. Member: Come on; you gave the minister a chance.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. This matter is before the House. It is debatable, the debate has begun and it is my interpretation of the Standing Orders that we must now begin the question period, and then at three o'clock the subject

[Mr. Roberts.]

matter is transferred, pursuant to Standing Orders, to government orders to be taken up at some other time.

If there are any other points to be raised with respect to the continuance of the debate, I will hear them at three o'clock. At the moment, I must begin the question period. I cannot put the question, because the debate is not concluded; there are other members who wish to participate.

ORAL QUESTION PERIOD

[*English*]

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

OVERPAYMENTS UNDER PROGRAM

Mr. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Mr. Speaker, I would like to direct a question to the Minister of Employment and Immigration. Yesterday, in the report of the minister's department, the Auditor General of Canada identified \$142 million in overpayments under the UIC program. This, of course, is in addition to the \$68 million already identified by the minister's department, for a total of \$210 million in overpayments.

• (1417)

At a time when this government is supposed to be practising restraint, what does the minister intend to do about this intolerable situation? I can assure him that this kind of mismanagement and excess is unacceptable to the people of Canada.

Hon. Bud Cullen (Minister of Employment and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the hon. member's question: it gives me an opportunity to put the facts into better perspective than heretofore. We are not just embarking now, but we embarked a year ago on seeking the assistance of the Auditor General with a view to indicating to us how we could best balance the service operation with the control mechanisms.

The Auditor General was good enough to put a team of experts into this field to examine something like 1,000 files out of the 2.3 million that were involved within a year. They spent about 4½ hours per file, where we only had the opportunity to spend about 20 minutes per file. On that basis, he gave us some indication of areas where there may be—and he cannot be positive about this—undetected overpayment. On that basis, not this year but last year we embarked upon a pilot project called Information on Hirings, from employers. We have put that in place in six regions of the country. We are improving our on-line computer system. I think it is important to realize that in any payment that is made directly to an individual or groups of individuals, invariably there are going to be overpayments. We have to determine how we can best balance the service with the overpayment and tighten up