

Unemployment Insurance Act[*Translation*]

It is better to be rich and healthy than poor and sick.

[*English*]

For it is clear that the less advantaged economic regions of our country and our fellow Canadians who fashion out their lives in these areas will have little cause to celebrate this Government's arcane approach to curing economic and labour ills, an approach with has as its motto: "Bleed them a little more." Those who were not sick, euphemistically speaking, before may well yearn for the days when the Minister had yet to launch her frontal attack on Canada's labour force.

This same Minister claimed on June 1 before the Standing Committee on Labour, Employment and Immigration that she was ushering in "a new comprehensive labour force development strategy." As a strategy it would appear that it sweeps under the rug the social economic consequences of both the proposed changes of Bill C-21 and the negative impact of the Government record regarding labour and business.

The more we examine the actual results of the Government's rule, the more Canadians will ask themselves: "Why this punitive legislation?"

[*Translation*]

Why does the Conservative Government want to pervert the traditional role of the unemployment insurance system as financial support for the unemployed in hard times? Note that we could make those who quit their jobs wait an extra six weeks for a total of three months before they become eligible for benefits. And, depending on the region of residence, the benefit period could be even shorter for many of them, about nine weeks in some cases.

[*English*]

For their misfortune due to economic factors outside their control, workers will have to pay longer into an insurance plan from which they will derive fewer benefits. This unfairness will be compounded by a 15 per cent increase in premiums as well. Workers will, in effect, be subjected to an increased payroll tax at a time when officials in the Department project a UI fund surplus of \$1.2 billion.

• (1550)

Even worse, Mr. Speaker, according to departmental officials every year some 350,000 people who have occasion to leave their jobs do so without just cause as defined by the Department. By severely restricting access to benefits of some 70 per cent of those who feel the need to change their work—that is 35 per cent of all unemployed—the Minister is generating a substantial saving by reducing benefits pay out.

A cynic, and I hesitate to say that there are many in this House, might suggest that a further tightening up of the just cause definition would be appropriate and that the resulting penalties and the duration of benefits would encompass still more workers. This is not an unattractive outcome, mind you, if it is the Minister's objective to make labour more pliant, less mobile and more flexible in its negotiations with employers, and I read "willingness to take less".

My hon. colleague from Notre-Dame-de-Grace has already referred to analysts and critics in business and in the media who are calling this a crude and primitive effort aimed at increasing worker productivity. The mean spiritedness of this legislation will be felt everywhere as the effects of the restrictions inflict themselves upon all regions. While attention in this House has been centred on the negative consequences in the East, other parts of Canada are no less affected.

From eastern Ontario to Toronto, to southern Saskatchewan, and as far west as Vancouver, the period for which people must work to qualify for UI has increased by 40 per cent to 60 per cent, while the duration of UI benefits or qualifications for it has decreased by 15 per cent to 22 per cent.

I add that under Sections 51, 55(3) and 55(4) the Tories will ensure that Atlantic Canada appreciates the full meaning of its economic and labour strategy by withdrawing government involvement in regionally extended benefits and fishermen's benefits, a not altogether indifferent portion of the total of \$2.9 billion government commitment now being withdrawn from UI.

What happens when local economies lose this injection of cash? Where will the unfortunate unemployed go to make up the resulting drop in personal and family income? The Minister has already indicated that the appropriate provincial welfare agencies should take up their dutiful responsibilities. The provincial taxpayers should bear the burden. That is a strange beast, this provincial taxpayer, because he shares the same wallet as the federal taxpayer. Moreover, the climate of concern