

Unemployment Insurance Act

permit, as suggested by the hon. member, some kind of an interrogation to take place on all subjects. If the minister wishes to speak and unanimous consent is given, the Chair is ready to recognize him; but I will find it difficult to allow all kinds of questions to be asked.

Mr. Baldwin: That is not my suggestion at all.

Mr. Andras: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I rise to say I accept the hon. member's kind remarks about my return to the House after a bout of flu. I regret the inconvenience which has been caused to hon. members of the committee. But I did present myself, with my officials, during two meetings of the committee for some six hours, for some six hours. Also, and a great deal of effort has been put forward this evening to establish that the subject matter which was then considered is somewhat relevant to that which is under consideration now, with which I agree. We did present ourselves for six or seven hours and I understand there were a further dozen hours or so of questioning. I suggest that if opposition members ask questions for between 12 and 18 hours on a bill which contains only two clauses—

An hon. Member: Why not answer them?

Mr. Andras: I have read the transcript and I have not seen anything in the questions which would suggest there was anything to be gained by rising now and speaking on the motion for third reading.

Mr. Nielsen: On the point of order to which the minister has just spoken, I wish to point out that there were 19 members on that committee and the minister is accountable to the House of Commons, not to a standing committee. The very fact that he was absent for three or four of those meetings prevented us asking him many of the questions we wanted to ask as members of the opposition, so he cannot take refuge in the device of saying he cannot find anything intelligent in the committee proceedings. Again, perhaps this was because of his absence.

My second point is this. I was under the impression that my hon. friend from Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander) was speaking on a point of order directed to calling attention to the ordinary custom in this House, that the minister make an opening statement when he presents a motion for third reading of a bill. Surely we are entitled to such an opening statement. The hon. member for Hamilton West will be our lead-off speaker after Your Honour has disposed of the point of order. I request that the minister make that opening statement.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): The hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) might wish the Chair to rule on the point of order he has raised. First, as to what took place in a committee, as far as the Chair is concerned it is not in a position to take into account such procedures or the absence of hon. members from committee meetings. Were it otherwise, we would get very deeply involved indeed. The fact that the minister may not have appeared in the committee to the satisfaction of hon. members—possibly for a good reason—or the fact that he does not elect to make an opening statement on third reading does not constitute grounds for a valid point of order.

[The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel).]

Mr. Reid: Why not listen to the hon. member for Hamilton West? He might have something to say.

Mr. Alexander: Yes, my dear colleague, I shall have something to say. There is one thing you cannot do in this place; you cannot prevent us from speaking, as you tried to do in the standing committee, by moving closure in an effort to prevent Members of Parliament doing their jobs.

This bill was supposed to be a panacea to cure all the ills of the original Unemployment Insurance Act. This was to have been the means of ensuring legislation which would work to the advantage not only of the government but of everyone else involved in the structure of the unemployment insurance scheme. We were led to believe that his was the answer; this was what the government had attempted to do with its former bill, Bill C-229. Who would have imagined that we would find ourselves in the terrible dilemma we face today?

The act was supposed to bring benefits of administration. Events have proved otherwise and the heartlessness of the government has brought frustration to many thousands of Canadians. In the last analysis it is obvious that the bill has not turned out to be a panacea as we were led to believe. Responsibility for the dilemma now confronting us can be placed squarely on the shoulders of the government. If we were to believe what we were told, the structure of the fund would maintain equilibrium provided unemployment was less than 4 per cent. In these circumstances there was a responsibility upon the government to develop the economy; to ensure that the economy reached full employment, if we can accept this phrase as being meaningful. In this case the contributions made by the government would beat the lowest figure.

What happened? The government attacked inflation by bringing about high unemployment. Hon. members opposite have since confessed that this was wrong. The Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) sat in his high chair and said, "I will go to 6 per cent."

Some hon. Members: No, no.

Mr. Alexander: Mr. Speaker, it is amazing that they should say "No, no" I say this is what he said. He said he was prepared, in order to cure inflation, for unemployment to reach at least 6 per cent. In doing so he caused a degree of frustration among thousands of Canadians which citizens of a civilized country should not have to endure. High levels of unemployment meant that the unemployment insurance scheme was hopelessly handicapped.

I notice the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) realizes, at last, that it is necessary to produce a target figure for unemployment. After much prodding he has finally admitted that the government's goal for 1973 is a rate of less than 6 per cent. It is quite a challenge. We hope the government will accept the challenge, because if it is overcome there is no need for us to worry about huge advances being made to the unemployment insurance fund; we will not have to worry about a large amount being taken from the consolidated revenue fund as part of the government's share. This should be the government's goal. It should have been its goal in the first place, but it abdicated its responsibilities in this regard.