

Unemployment Insurance Act

I would like to bring to the attention of Hon. Members the fact that there has been an agreement made here. There are Ministers in the Chamber, whether they are in the Chamber or outside. There are also other Members outside the Chamber. The Hon. Member for Kingston and the Islands should know whether or not he should bring to the attention of the House who is or who is not in the Chamber.

Mrs. Dobbie: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the Hon. Member for Kingston and the Islands (Mr. Milliken). He could see that I was growing a little tired and needed a rest.

Mr. Wappel: You need a long rest.

Mrs. Dobbie: Unemployment insurance at its best and in its purest form is a program that permits people to bridge the gap in tough periods. It allows them to do that without attaching the stigma of welfare to their temporary misfortune. However, let us not kid ourselves for one minute into believing that we can hide welfare programs under the umbrella of unemployment insurance for very long. We are not fooling anyone, least of all those poor souls who are forced to eke out their existence in short-term, dead-end jobs that ultimately land them back on the UI rolls. They know that their sustenance is predicated on a form of welfare, no matter how euphemistically pretty the label given to it.

Therefore, the Government's revised program makes good sense. It offers hope to countless Canadians for a better tomorrow. It holds out a promise to all who despair in finding work for lack of qualifications. It holds out a promise that they, too, can share in Canada's bounty and that they have not been abandoned or forgotten.

I commend the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mrs. McDougall) for her courage and far-sightedness in devising a strategy that respects Canadian workers and offers a new hope to the many who have none today.

This is an excellent program. I am proud to be a part of a Government that has the honesty and integrity to deal with the real needs of Canadians and to deal with the needs of the unemployed by seeking to help them in a manner that leaves them with their dignity and provides them with hope for the future.

Mr. Francis G. LeBlanc (Cape Breton Highlands—Canso): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this legislation. However, I must begin with a confession.

Before being elected, my occupation was senior policy analyst in the UI Analysis Directorate of Employment and Immigration. That places me in the dubious category of being the only Member in this House, I think, who has had three Tory Ministers as former bosses.

Some Hon. Members: And you're still alive?

Mr. LeBlanc (Cape Breton Highlands—Canso): My discomfort at this blot on my past is eased somewhat by the election of my colleague, the Hon. Member for Kingston and the Islands (Mr. Milliken).

I want to say that although the unit in which I was previously employed was probably involved in the analytical work for Bill C-21, I would not want that to imply any collaboration or even support for this legislation on my part.

• (0020)

Quite the contrary. However, the background may be useful in terms of the perspective I can add to the debate this evening. Several of my colleagues have raised some of the more obvious flaws in the legislation. They have said, for example, that Canadian workers will pay more for less unemployment insurance protection under the Minister's proposed changes. That is true. When we see the increase in the premiums and the fact the Government is withdrawing from the program, combined with the new benefits schedule proposed by the Minister, there is less UI protection and higher premiums that workers will have to pay.

The second obvious flaw with the package is that the extra weeks that will be needed to qualify will cause major hardships in many of the rural communities in Canada. In my riding of Cape Breton Highlands—Canso, many communities depend on industries which are basically seasonal in nature. All that sustains these industries in the off season is unemployment insurance which provides income support for the people who work in the industries, and provides income to the businesses that are in those communities to keep the economy moving. Without unemployment insurance during that off season, unemployment would spread throughout the communities. Furthermore, there are no alternatives in