

*Labour*

still have not completely adjusted to the economic downturn that all Canadians experienced at that time.

In a November 1987 study Statistics Canada reports that the unemployment rate among Canadians over 55 continues to rise. They give up and stop looking for work all together, for instance among 55 to 64 year old persons. The labour participation rate has been going down very marginally, whereas with the over-all population it has been going up significantly.

The average length of unemployment also tells a sad story about older workers. Their length of unemployment is 66 per cent higher than workers unemployed between the ages of 15 and 54. We must remember that that 15 to 54 age group includes unemployed youth who, as we all know, are double the national rate.

It took the Government two and one-half years to set up the program for older worker adjustment. This is an alternative program to the Labour Adjustment Benefit Program set up by the Liberal Government in the early 1980s. The Government saw fit to let the Labour Adjustment Benefit Program for older workers lapse, to leave older workers unemployed in this economy, without a program to provide any assistance, for two and one-half years.

• (1710)

Certainly the Liberal Party supports the concept of the Bill, particularly because of the void that now exists with the lapsing of this program. The area of concern to Liberals is the fact that the program is not broad enough to meet the needs of older worker adjustment, particularly in light of the Free Trade Agreement. Its scope is too limited. Only a small number of older workers will benefit. It is the only program specifically designed for older workers when a range and a variety of programs are needed. Older workers with fewer years of working experience are not included.

Workers would have to exhaust severance pay and unemployment insurance benefits without finding a job before being eligible. We should remember that this is in a period of their lives when many workers are still carrying a mortgage, supporting a family, or perhaps trying to send one or two children to university. It is not simply the older worker who is negatively affected; it is the entire family and the future of that family.

We are critical of the rather arbitrary assessment criteria for receipt of benefits on a case by case basis, for instance, opportunities for alternative economic prospects, prospects of re-employment, training and mobility. Just how will they be applied and who will they leave out? The maximum benefits are inadequate for many workers at a stage in life and family life at which they find themselves.

The programs are not yet ironclad with the provinces. There is still some concern about the program. Ontario is concerned about the exhaustion of benefits. It wants a more comprehensive approach. It thinks it may do the job in a strong economy now, but with the Budget we have all heard the predictions of recession on the way. What then will happen to older workers?

We have an additional concern since the Budget. Although eight of the provinces have signed an agreement, we have a situation now where those provinces will not be receiving cost sharing programs of revenue transfers from the federal Government which they had expected in this year's Budget. One has to wonder about their ability now to meet commitments they have made under this program. An additional concern is the ability of businesses to use it as a convenient downsizing cushion to supersede their responsibility for their employees.

Various participants at the Liberal task force public forum on free trade worker adjustment representing business, labour and social agencies all said that more and better adjustment for older workers is essential, especially in light of massive lay-offs resulting from the Free Trade Agreement and particularly affecting vulnerable older workers. There is no question that the situation for older workers will only worsen as the 21st century approaches.

The Department of Employment and Immigration predicts that the Canadian labour force is ageing rapidly. The number of members aged 45 to 64 is expected to increase by almost 2 million to 6.7 million before the year 2001. The report by the Advisory Council on Adjustment, known as the de Grandpré report, states that older workers once unemployed take longer to obtain another job. It is interesting to note that the de Grandpré report itself recognizes the limitations of this program before the House today, saying that it is the only form of assistance available specifically for older workers. There is no similar support program for those older workers