

Government Orders

It is difficult to determine whether such opposition concerns are real or simply represent mere political gamesmanship. However, it seems only fair to give these members the benefit of the doubt.

I would like to take a few moments to address some of the misconceptions clearly plaguing some opposition members and explain why passage of the bill is so important for assuring further progress in providing even higher levels of service to Canadians.

Let me state what this bill is not designed to do. It is not, as some opposition members have suggested, a power grab or an attempt to raid areas of provincial jurisdiction. This should be clear from even the most cursory reading of this bill, which makes no significant changes to the statutory elements of the founding departments that are being brought together under this legislation.

Equally important is the fact that this bill does not change the powers of the federal government or the provinces. Nor does it seek to grant new powers to the federal government, as some have tried to suggest. The department's mandate is clearly limited to just those matters over which Parliament has jurisdiction. Nor will there be any new powers granted by clause 20, which empowers the minister to sign contracts with agencies and institutions other than the provinces. This authority already exists and therefore represents no change whatsoever.

If such concerns are unfounded, what does this bill really seek to do? Simply put, it seeks to recognize in a legislative, unified way the restructuring already under way, which is bringing together under one umbrella organization portions of the former departments of employment and immigration, health and welfare, secretary of state, and all of labour.

This consolidation is critical, since it will allow us to take a more holistic approach to the social, economic and training issues that have traditionally been addressed by these departments. It will allow us to provide better service at lower cost and develop the flexible, imaginative, and highly targeted approaches needed to adequately address the challenges facing Canadians now and in the future.

Of course this process of renewal has been under way for some time. I am pleased to say that this new department has had a number of successes in developing new approaches so Canadians can better cope with an increasingly demanding labour market.

As gratifying as this is, more remains to be done. That is why the changes contained in the bill are so important. To begin with, it will help us build on these initial successes by clarifying the role of the department and the responsibilities of the minister to both Parliament and Canadians generally. It will simplify the

current complex trail of statutory powers, many of them going back to the original pieces of legislation that set up the founding departments, by providing one act that sets out the mandate and powers of the department. Such a change will clarify the identity of the department by laying out for both employees and clients the department's goals and the resources it will have to achieve them.

• (1035)

As well, the legislation will give people and organizations working with the department a clear idea of just who it is they are working with. As incredible as it may seem, many departmental officials still use old letterhead bearing the names of their former departments for legal and contracting purposes. This is confusing for partners, since in their minds those old departments no longer exist.

Of course these are not the only administrative problems to be addressed. For instance, without the proper enabling legislation simple tasks such as transferring personnel can be costly and time consuming. This is also the case with large and detailed contracts, which often involve a number of former departments.

Most important of all is the need to bring the current transitional phase of restructuring to a close and then move forward. We need to build on our recent successes and undertake exciting new initiatives aimed at investing in our most important asset, people. To do this we need to clear away administrative obstacles so we can further undertake new initiatives such as UI reform, develop new programs and services under the human resource investment fund, and improve programs for our most vulnerable citizens, including seniors and the disabled.

Finally, this legislation will improve service to Canadians while at the same time ensuring taxpayers' dollars are spent in the most cost effective manner possible.

The bill before us will allow us to achieve all these goals. It will create the architecture required to implement the reforms needed to support Canadians with the job training opportunities they need to enter the next century with confidence. I would encourage members to support Bill C-96.

Mr. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Ref.): Madam Speaker, Bill C-96, an act to establish the Department of Human Resources Development and to amend and repeal certain related acts, is basically just reorganization of the department and does not offer any substantive changes.

It amazes me that with the number of people who are currently dependent on HRD for their welfare, some legitimately and some not, with the country in economic doldrums, with the debt increasing, with the IMF recently downgrading our country's rating by 50 per cent six weeks ago, the government persists in serving up bills that nibble around the edges of these problems, which affect us all.