

amine the legislation. I invite them to follow what is their constitutional right. They are doing that.

What we have here is a power play by the government. The power play is the threat that if January 1 comes and Bill C-21 is not law, and the changes have not been made to the Unemployment Insurance Act, the government is not going to introduce what it has become practice to do in the House for the last eight years or so. That is to say that a bill would be brought to the House. It would receive unanimous consent for all stages in jig time. It would extend the variable entrance requirement. The government has threatened this House and the other place that if this bill is not through the Senate that it will not introduce the variable entrance requirement bill. What we would have is 14 weeks required for unemployment insurance benefits right across the country.

It further goes on to say that if the bill is not passed, particularly since it is a Liberal-dominated Senate, the Liberals want southern Ontario to only have 14 weeks of work to qualify for benefits. People in areas like the Atlantic provinces and northern Ontario would have to work 14 weeks to get unemployment insurance benefits where in some areas they may only have to work 10 weeks.

I want to set that stage because this is a threat that the government has made. It is a power play. It is a power play between this Conservative government and the Liberal-dominated Senate. We have these two playing chicken. Who is caught in the middle? It is the ordinary unemployed, mostly poor people. That is who is caught in the middle. I think it is despicable on the part of this government to actually threaten that and be prepared to carry out the threat. But nothing surprises me any more from this gang over here.

• (1620)

It is our position that what the government ought to do is introduce the variable entrance requirement bill. If it wants to make it contingent on the bill being passed in the other place, the legislation being put in place or the variable entrance requirement legislation will die, I have no problem with that. We are prepared to support that. I say that to the parliamentary secretary.

Supply

It seems to me that it is very unfair and cruel to tamper with the lives of people by issuing these threats. It is not fair and I think members of the government should stop.

I am prepared to criticize the Liberals in this House as well, never mind the Liberals in the other House. The Liberals in this House have suddenly discovered how important unemployment insurance is. It was the Liberals with Bryce Mackasey as the minister who introduced a very progressive Unemployment Insurance Act in 1971.

I want to remind the House that at that time that act was based on a full unemployment rate of 4 per cent. The premiums charged to employers and employees guaranteed the payment of benefits to those who were unemployed up to a 4 per cent unemployment rate. Any unemployment beyond 4 per cent, the federal government picked up the cost out of general revenues.

It was not long after that that the economy started to slow down and the unemployment rate started to rise and 4 per cent became 6 per cent. Then it became a variable rate. We all remember the changes that were brought in in 1976 to the Unemployment Insurance Act.

First, the members of the government of the day created the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission. They changed the fixed entrance requirement of eight weeks to a variable requirement of 10 to 14. They changed the benefit structure. Claimants were now entitled to one week of initial benefits for each week of insured employment up to 25 weeks. If they were still unemployed, they could claim up to 13 weeks of labour force extended benefits.

In 1978 the Hon. Bud Cullen was the minister. He introduced sweeping changes in the fall of 1978 which went into effect in 1979. The claimants were now required to repay a portion of benefits received if their annual income exceeded an amount which was one and a half times their yearly maximum insurable earnings.

Second, the benefit rate was reduced to 60 per cent of the average weekly insurable earnings from 66-2/3 per cent. There were higher entrance requirements. Anyone who had not had 14 weeks of insurable earnings in the year preceding the qualifying period was required to have at least 20 weeks. A repeater now had to work the VER plus one week for each week of benefits received in