

Oral Questions

I want to quote again what the minister said last night: "I have never been sexually harassed myself. If I were, I would certainly want to make it known that I had been so favoured".

Is the Acting Prime Minister prepared to reject these comments categorically here in this House and say that they do not reflect the government's policy?

[English]

Hon. Don Mazankowski (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance): Madam Speaker, as I indicated there will be a statement of clarification made by the hon. minister.

Ms. Copps: What about you?

Mr. Mazankowski: The hon. member says: "What about you?" I did not make the statement and I have full confidence that the minister of fisheries will make that clarification. She has known the hon. minister for quite some time. I think she recognizes that a jest was involved in this. He was making fun of himself and not sexually harassed women.

Ms. Copps: And cripples and coloured.

Mr. Clark (Yellowhead): Wasn't it Jean Pelletier who said that?

An hon. member: Yes.

Mr. Mazankowski: Madam Speaker, while I understand very clearly the sensitivity of this issue, I appeal to the hon. member to wait for the minister to clarify whatever misunderstanding may have occurred. I can assure the hon. member that her reflection of what the hon. minister said is not an accurate reflection of government policy.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Hon. Herb Gray (Windsor West): Madam Speaker, my question is for the minister of employment. Among the victims of this recession are tens of thousands of workers in their 40s and 50s. These employees have been offered and have taken voluntary separation packages from their firms. However, under the government's new rules, if the employees take these packages they are cut off

forever from the possibility of collecting unemployment insurance.

The minister has said that his changes to the unemployment insurance system were designed to catch bums, cheaters and fraud artists.

Why does the minister think that employees in their 40s and 50s who have to take these severance packages are bums, cheaters and fraud artists? Does he not realize that they are decent people who are still in the labour market and will have need of the unemployment insurance system?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Employment and Immigration): Madam Speaker, I find it incredible that the hon. member would stand up in this House and put these words in my mouth. I did not utter them.

What I indicated, and what the government has indicated quite clearly, is that on the general severance issue you cannot receive severance benefits and unemployment insurance benefits at the same time. What he does not add is that once your severance benefits run out you are then eligible to collect unemployment insurance benefits.

The hon. member is talking about an adjustment issue, policies the government has been pursuing since 1984 in a much more pro-active way than any government before.

Hon. Herb Gray (Windsor West): Madam Speaker, the minister's officials said quite clearly yesterday that workers who accept severance packages will not be eligible for unemployment insurance at any time if his rules go into effect.

Thousands of Canadian workers in these tough times have been taking voluntary separation packages. There is no scam here. There is no rip-off here. They are just companies and employees trying to cope as best they can with the effects of this government's economic policies.

How can the minister talk about the need to restructure the economy and at the same time try to put into effect a policy which will undermine attempts at this restructuring being carried out in a way that is fair and humane for the men and women involved who have to stay in the work force?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Employment and Immigration): Madam Speaker, I want Canadians to know that when we talk about adjustment measures, the hon. member who just stood up and pretended to be so