

**An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act**  
**June 16, 2010**

**Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.):**

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak to Bill C-13 on the last part of its voyage through Parliament, the so-called fairness for military families act.

The proposed act will amend part I of the Employment Insurance Act to extend the period during which employment insurance parental benefits may be paid for Canadian Forces members whose start date of parental leave is deferred or who are directed to return to duty from parental leave.

This act will help relatively few Canadians. We are told by the department that it would be about 50 to 60 people a year at a cost of about \$600,000. Nonetheless it is important for those who it will assist, and it assists Canadians that we all agree are entirely worthy of that assistance.

As my colleague, the parliamentary secretary referred to, at committee we heard from Lieutenant-Colonel James Duquette, who was posted to the Golan Heights just four days after the birth of his first child. As such, he missed his opportunity to take parental leave. It was very nice to hear from him, from Kabul, and his wife, Anne, who testified as well. They made very compelling witnesses in support of the bill.

There is a curious factor, though, which is the timeline of the bill. On April 5, the government had a press release about Bill C-13, indicating it would introduce it. On April 12, the legislation was introduced and then it was almost a month before it was debated in the House. It was very quickly passed by the House and went to committee. It was not until May 26 when the human resources committee had this testimony, went through clause-by-clause and everything passed. It is now another month since it came back to the House. I do not know if it would have even come to the House this week if the Liberal Party had not inquired about its status.

As the parliamentary secretary suggested, all parties support it. Therefore, it makes sense to get this through. It has been kind of a case of hurry up and wait and hurry up and wait on the bill. It is important.

I can talk from a personal point of view. I come from a military area, Dartmouth—Cole Harbour. It is home to many serving members of the Canadian Forces and many more veterans. I think we have one of the highest populations of veterans in Canada.

It was not very long ago that I attended the funeral for Petty Officer Second Class Craig Blake, who was the 143rd Canadian killed in Afghanistan. He was killed in the Panjwai District in Afghanistan. He was a member of the Fleet Diving Unit Atlantic. He was diffusing IEDs when he lost his life. He has a wife and two sons. He was a hockey coach. He was remembered at his funeral for the wonderful community work he took part in and the great loss it was to his family.

I remember having a connection to one of the earliest deaths in Afghanistan, and that was Corporal Paul Davis who died in March 2006. I have spoken in the House before about flying home from Parliament on a Friday with a number of other parliamentarians. When we arrived in Halifax and turned on our Blackberrys, we heard the awful news that Corporal Paul Davis had been killed in Afghanistan. His father, Jim Davis, is a dear friend of mine and has been an eloquent and passionate spokesperson on behalf of military families who have lost loved ones.

I have many constituents who have served in Afghanistan and have come home. Even if they have come home relatively unscathed from their service in Afghanistan, their families have paid a very significant price. They make great sacrifices. To go months without seeing their family is a very difficult thing, even if they return home safely.

Most of us who sit in this place travel from somewhere else in Canada and we find it difficult, especially with young families as in my case. It is difficult to be away for chunks of life. It is very difficult for military families to be away for months at a time, as in the case with Lieutenant-Colonel Duquette and others, especially around the time of the birth of a child or shortly after. It makes no sense that we should compound the sacrifice of that family by not allowing those families to have parental leave.

The bill will make a difference for those families. I think it could have been stronger. We appreciate the amendment that the government promised us. I spoke to this when it first came to the House and indicated that we should ensure we covered as many military families as possible. The government, through the parliamentary secretary, indicated that the government would do that and it would ensure that amendment would be in place.

Others serving abroad could have been included in the bill. With the cost of the bill being only about half a million dollars a year, it would not have been very much to add others, for example, those in police forces who serve overseas.

When Lieutenant-Colonel Duquette appeared from Kabul via video conference at committee, he was asked a question by an opposition member about police and RCMP. The question was "Should we be amending this bill, in your view, to include those people as well?" In his answer, Lieutenant-Colonel Duquette said, "Yes, I definitely think that applying it to police serving internationally would be very important".

Even departmental officials indicated at that same committee that this would not have been such a terrible hardship. I asked Mr. Louis Beauséjour, a fine bureaucrat in the Department of HRSDC, "How much of a problem would it be to have this bill apply to other personnel beyond serving members of the Canadian Forces?" His answer was, "There was no reason other than to determine what the underlying reason for the amendment was".

We could have amended the bill. It could have been a much stronger bill, but nonetheless it is what it is. It will assist a certain number of military families. I want to indicate my appreciation to the parliamentary secretary and to the government for providing the amendment that is part of the bill today.

When we look at employment insurance, we need to look at the big picture. This has been a topic of much debate in the House and across Canada in the last couple of years.

Our social infrastructure is not suitably designed for the kind of recession that Canada has undergone in the last couple of years. After the economic update of 2008, there was an outcry from people across the country saying that we needed to provide support to people who needed help the most. Among the most vulnerable people were those who had lost their jobs and those who would lose their job. At that point in time, the recession was just taking hold and the government was very slow to act.

Then the issue of stimulus came up over Christmas and January 2009, and the new budget came in January 2009. Everybody assumed that the government would seriously address the issue of employment insurance, that it would look at, particularly, the issue of access to EI and the fact that many people simply did not have access depending on where they lived across the country. Access could be denied in a lot of cases. Quite often it is denied to women who have lost their job because they tend to work part-time hours and may not have enough hours to qualify.

When the government brought in its plans for employment insurance in the budget of early 2009, it did not address that issue at all. That brought cries of protest not only from who we might expect would be opposed to its inaction, such as labour unions and public policy people, but from people in just about every province, including provinces that were led by spokespeople like Premier Brad Wall, Premier Gordon Campbell and Premier Dalton McGuinty. All of them said that one of the gaps in the employment insurance system was the issue of access. Still we had no action from the government.

At one point in time, 1.6 million people were unemployed and almost half of those people had no access to employment insurance.

Changes have been made to the EI system over the years and some of those changes have been made by varying governments, but they have always reflected the fact that employment insurance should be there for those who most need it. A lot could have been done.

Bill C-13 to me is a very worthy improvement to EI. All parties have indicated their support for the bill. We need to do all we can to support military families, to recognize they have a particular burden, that those who serve and the families that serve those who serve make a special and significant sacrifice on a regular basis. The bill will do something to alleviate that. It is a limited bill and it could have been made better. It has been made a bit better but more could have been done. Nonetheless, I want to assure the Liberal Party's support for the bill. It is a worthy initiative and a recognition for those who serve our country valiantly.