



Paying people not to work is absurd.

DAVID DUPLISEA
COMMENTARY

An interesting thing has happened since New Brunswick's economy reopened for business after the COVID-19 pandemic. Some people seem to have little interest in returning to work.

Stranger still, the federal government continues to pay people to stay home and is even talking about expanding the Employment Insurance (EI) program to make benefits more accessible.

Accessibility is a problem, but not in the way federal officials seem to believe. If anything, EI has become too accessible, offering citizens a viable financial alternative to working for a living.

It's time to return EI to its original purpose of insulating workers against sudden job loss while providing incentives to get back into the workforce as soon as possible. The prosperity of our community depends upon it.

I've certainly heard from members time and again, though more intensely amid Ottawa's intention to make changes to the system once more. It is time to make the right changes, to return it to the safety net it was designed to be.

We've all heard anecdotes about this business or that business experiencing difficulty hiring new workers, or even having to bring people in from abroad. One might be tempted to think that our province must be approaching full employment, what with the population continuing to grow yet new positions being so difficult to fill.

A quick look at the EI statistics demolishes any such assumption.

New Brunswick has nearly 46,000 active EI recipients who are not working. More than 65 per cent are under age 54, while about 29 per cent of all those receiving EI are under age 34. The numbers are similar across the Atlantic Provinces. So what's going on?

Why are so many people not working while there are tens of thousands of jobs available that Atlantic Canadian companies are struggling to fill? And why is the federal government paying prospective employees to stay out of the job market?

It is absolutely true that some of those people are on EI because their circumstances fit the program's original purpose, we need to continue this safety net. However, the larger trend here is worrying.

It makes no sense that companies and employers of all sizes and sectors are forced to recruit workers from far away at great expense, while tens of thousands of unemployed live locally collecting

government benefits. It makes even less sense for the government to extend those benefits or make them easier to obtain.

The federal government set all this in motion by making EI the vehicle for delivering emergency CERB benefits during the pandemic. But this was a measure of last resort and, in any case, the emergency has passed: it is time to reduce the scope of EI to its traditional role.

Running EI as a sort of guaranteed annual income program is not fair to all those who are working and paying higher premiums to support the EI system. It reduces the labour force of people who are ready and willing to work and it weakens businesses, which in turn weakens our whole economy, ultimately reducing the tax base that is needed to support vital public services such as health care and education.

As the Parliamentary season draws to a close and MPs return to their ridings, I hope they will listen to members of the business community on EI reform. Businesses want EI reforms that get people back to work.

There is a lesson to consider in Herman Melville's classic short story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener."

A friend recently recounted the story while we were discussing this very issue of EI. Bartleby is a young man, hired as a clerk in an office, whose productivity steadily drops along with his willingness to work for a living. Whenever someone in the office asks Bartleby to perform a job, he simply replies "I would prefer not to" and goes on doing whatever he likes.

Bartleby's laissez-faire attitude does not do much to advance the success of the business or any of the people who depend upon it, but the person it hurts the most is Bartleby. He loses his job and eventually dies of starvation because he cannot even be bothered to feed himself.

Bartleby's former employer and fellow employees are left to ponder why it is he was so disinclined to work.

A province of Bartlebys will never realize its full potential. Strong communities require strong businesses, supported by a strong work ethic and the understanding that our fortunes rise or fall together.

David Duplisea is Chief Executive Officer of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce. His commentary appears monthly.