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Ex-Nortel workers: Cutting off the disabled

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Any bankruptcy is painful. Workers lose their jobs and creditors can lose their shirts — but there is usually a chance to bounce back.

Not so for Nortel employees who were on long-term disability payments at the time their employer went bankrupt nearly two years ago. They can't start over. Yet their disability payments will be cut off at the end of this month, after the Conservatives used their new majority in the Senate to defeat efforts to keep them above water.

These workers deserved better from Nortel's discredited management, which botched their disability plan. But also they deserved better from the new Tory Senators who owe their jobs to Stephen Harper, and will get their own gold-plated pensions and full disability coverage courtesy of the Prime Minister's munificence.

These Senators rejected a proposal by Senator Art Eggleton to grant the 400 disabled ex-Nortel employees preferred status over other creditors when the telecommunications conglomerate is finally wound up under court supervision. Many of them are sick and unemployable, and say they will have to go on welfare. Eggleton notes that dozens of other countries have stronger protections for long-term disability.

Industry Minister Tony Clement warned that any relief for the workers would have prompted other creditors to litigate. But that's no reason not to legislate. Tory Senator Vim Kochhar suggested other creditors could voluntarily come to the aid of the disabled workers — implying that they should depend on the kindness of strangers. Rather than corporate charity, moral clarity is what these workers need.