

Oral Questions

House that the confusion which exists now in connection with meat inspection in Quebec will not appear in other provinces also, which would have very dangerous implications for the health of Canadians?

Hon. Marc Lalonde (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Leader of the Opposition undoubtedly knows, meat inspection is carried out, in some cases, by the Department of Agriculture of Canada, in the case of companies exporting meat outside one province. When the meat is sold exclusively within one province, the inspection is performed by provincial officials, except when the provincial authorities have delegated their responsibility to the federal authority, which is the federal Department of Agriculture. When inspections are done by the provincial authorities, it is of course their duty to enforce the regulations that have been adopted. As regards the responsibility of my department, the Food and Drugs Act contains very clear provisions on that subject, as there are in other acts, like the Criminal Code, for instance, provisions prohibiting certain practices. It is impossible to eliminate prohibited practices completely, but it is possible to make sure that when violations are uncovered immediate action will be taken by the Department of Justice and the Attorneys General of the provinces in order to enforce the law very firmly.

[*English*]

Mr. Stanfield: In view of the fact that it has been known to the minister and his department for more than two years that in Quebec some 300 meat processing outlets were not receiving adequate inspection under either federal or provincial programs, can the minister tell us what steps he took during that period to strengthen surveillance of those facilities by his officers under the Food and Drug Act?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lalonde: I am afraid that the hon. Leader of the Opposition is ill-informed as regards the responsibilities of my department, of the federal Department of Agriculture and of the provincial Departments of Agriculture. In cases where companies operate within one province only, the responsibility, in the case of Quebec, for instance, rests clearly with the provincial authorities.

As Minister of National Health and Welfare, I am not the one who has the primary responsibility for meat inspection at the slaughterhouses. All I can do is intervene under the provisions of the Food and Drugs Act. My officials are empowered to intervene under the provisions of the Food and Drugs Act whenever there are indications that certain measures should be taken. As for the case in point, it was as a result of steps taken by officials of my department that a police inquiry was held in Quebec concerning certain apparently shady operations, and the results of this inquiry are now in the process of being submitted to the Commission of Inquiry into organized crime in Quebec.

[*English*]

Mr. Stanfield: I take it from what the minister says that despite his knowledge that a large number of plants in the province of Quebec—quite apart from his knowledge of what may be going on in the rest of Canada—were not

[*Mr. Stanfield.*]

subjected to adequate inspection despite the Food and Drugs Act that makes it a crime to hold or to market food unfit for consumption, and despite the responsibilities of the minister in connection with that act and the powers given his inspectors under it, the minister did not feel any responsibility in terms of the health of the Canadian people to take any initiative whatsoever to see that in fact inspection did take place and the situation corrected in these 300 or so uninspected meat processing plants?

Some hon. Members: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lalonde: I am quite interested by the political speech made by the hon. Leader of the Opposition, but I am not at all impressed with his allegations. Two years ago this inquiry was undertaken at the instigation of officials of my department and, at the time, they acted on the basis of hearsay only. There were no specific indications of criminal activities. But as soon as such serious indications did come up, we asked the police authorities concerned to intervene and to take whatever action was necessary; and we have now the results before us today. Furthermore, I feel that I have no apologies to make to the hon. Leader of the Opposition for the work done by my officials in this regard.

[*English*]

REASON FOR FAILURE TO PROSECUTE QUEBEC MERCHANTS
SELLING MEAT UNFIT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION

Mr. James A. McGrath (St. John's East): Mr. Speaker, my supplementary is to the same minister. The RCMP knew back in 1969 that there was meat unfit for human consumption being sold on the market, and this matter was raised in the Quebec legislature as early as 1966 by the hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McGrath: Why has the minister not carried out the responsibility which is his under the Food and Drugs Act and taken action under that act, because it takes precedence over any provincial legislation?

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Lalonde (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I certainly was not Minister of National Health and Welfare in 1966, and I surely could find some assertions or allegations made in various places in 1953 and 1942 on this matter. We have to act as a department on the basis of somewhat serious information, and that is what has been done as early as 1973, where there were indications on which we could base our inquiry. It is hard for me to believe that the allegations made by the hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe were taken seriously in 1966, any more than some others he has made since then.

[*English*]

Mr. McGrath: I regret very much that the minister finds this subject so humorous. I can assure him that the people of Quebec find it less than funny.