

Meat Import Act

drafted by myself and my officials when I was minister, because I took that short sabbatical. It was also looked at by my colleague, the Hon. John Wise, when he was Minister of Agriculture. So the bill was drafted several times before it was finally presented to the House. It is really amazing to me that we are at the stage of giving this bill second reading today. The committee will be studying it and they may have certain amendments to present. As long as they are responsible and constructive suggestions, we will take a very good look at them.

We think this legislation will provide increased stability for the beef industry. This legislation will not over everything that people want. They will at least know that this legislation is on the books and that they will be able to abide by it. It will give Canadian cattlemen some of the assurances they need to plan beef production in the years ahead. You will notice, Mr. Speaker, I said "some of the assurances". This legislation will help stabilize beef supplies and prices to consumers. It will let our trading partners know where we stand on beef imports.

I am sure that a matter of such importance to Canadian farmers and consumers will receive the full support of hon. members. I will be happy to supply further details and respond to questions as the debate on this legislation proceeds.

Mr. Bert Hargrave (Medicine Hat): Mr. Speaker, I would like to say that I agree with the last thought that the minister expressed. He said it is rather strange that it has taken us this long to get this very important agricultural bill to second reading stage in the House. After all, the whole idea was first started by the cattle producers back in 1970. At that time the Canadian Cattlemen's Association made a proposal to the Hon. Bud Olson when he was minister of agriculture. So that shows how long cattlemen have been interested in this worthwhile project.

I had a brief meeting with the minister yesterday. At that time I referred to this as a bill which relates to meat imports. I attach a somewhat different reference to that phrase than the minister does, since I think we began a little earlier than the minister. However, I will say this. We in the official opposition fully support the broad principles of the bill. We are in agreement that second reading should take place today, followed immediately by the appropriate reference to the Standing Committee on Agriculture for a thorough examination, with ample opportunity to call interested and concerned witnesses.

● (1430)

The minister will well remember our Progressive Conservative efforts on this same subject during our period of government in 1979. These efforts included a very worthwhile beef import consultative committee that did the necessary background consultation with all segments of the cattle and beef production and marketing chain. This was followed by our beef import bill, as we called it at that time, which was scheduled for first reading the day after our government was defeated. We on this side of the House are pleased to note that Bill C-46 is in general agreement with the broad principles of

our earlier legislative plans. There are a few details that we would like to see changed, and I will comment on these a little later.

First of all, let us look at the need for beef import legislation. Canada's beef cattle industry is desperately in need of a shot of self-confidence, especially in the long term. Our well-known ten-year commodities cycle and traditional short-term ad hoc policies simply are not enough. We must have long-term policies. The longer the commodities cycle, such as ten years with cattle, the more important that is. Our cattle industry must have long-term policies which will provide genuine incentive to cattle producers to come back into the industry, or to start for the first time; or, more importantly, to start to rebuild our breeding herds.

I suggest it is highly significant that our Canadian beef cattle industry is still at the bottom of the cow and breeding cycle and the beef supply cycle. We have been on that low cycle point for about three years with very little evidence of any upturn. This meat import bill could make a good start at providing the beginning of that long-range incentive for our cattle industry. This legislation could indicate that the government does indeed understand the problems of cattle producers and genuinely wants to listen and respond to the concerns of major food producers in Canada.

Why, after three years, has there been no significant upturn in our cow and beef supply cycles? There are several basic contributing factors to this situation. First of all, 1980 was a bad year for cattlemen, especially cattle feeders, who suffered a net loss position across Canada of \$129 million. That is the worst loss position since these kinds of records were started back in 1970.

Second, beginning in 1980, we have been experiencing the highest interest rates in our history—along with every other part of our nation, of course—with no sign of relief. In addition, there are the companion factors of steadily rising feed grain and other production costs. These apply particularly to our cattle feeding sector.

Third is the whole subject of drought in western Canada. The natural and quite proper reaction to drought in the cattle industry is to reduce our numbers to fit available supplies of grass and forage feed. There has been a sequence of recent drought years. In fact, they now appear to be almost ongoing. In 1977 there was a single, one-year drought, but a very severe one. This was followed by the first six months of 1980 which impacted much more severely on western cattle producers than on their grain producing neighbours.

Today, in early spring, there is already yet another prospect of widespread prairie drought which appears to be part of a larger drought pattern across the western United States. Available forage feed supplies for next winter will be severely restricted, and we know that already because there has been a lack of snow run off so necessary for local flood irrigation feed projects. Here I am not referring to the concentrated irrigation districts in southern Alberta.