

been no policy initiatives announced in the throne speech. There have been absolutely no changes or thrusts in new trends at all in respect of ministerial announcements or in speeches inside or outside this House by members of the Cabinet. The only idea put forward, and this is a time-worn crutch known to all governments, federal or provincial, is the appointment of a committee. This is a time-worn crutch which is used when the only answer you can come up with is the establishment of a joint parliamentary committee. For this group on this side of the House, I say to you that we do not believe this is either the answer or even an answer to the inflationary crisis we are in right now.

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. Lawrence:** We had an election campaign, Sir, during which the policies of the parties were advocated. Certainly, this idea of a joint parliamentary committee was not what my leader advocated in that election campaign. It is not what we would have done had we been elected to power on October 30. For myself and my colleagues, I say that we are highly skeptical that anything worthwhile or any action fast enough to make any difference this winter will come out of this parliamentary committee. In spite of the lack of ideas and the lack of initiatives coming from the Cabinet or the ministerial benches, I can say to you that as a party we are willing to support it grudgingly, quizzically and doubtfully. We are willing to go along with this charade of setting up the committee in the hope that perhaps somehow, sometime and somewhere this Liberal delaying manoeuvre will produce something constructive, something worth while and something immediate to help the inflation trend in which we are now, certainly in respect of the cost of living.

There are conditions which we feel we must attach to our support and our co-operation in passing the motion to appoint a committee. Obviously, if the government had the time, and it does not, we should have liked to see the committee terms of reference wider. We think that focusing attention on food prices alone is only a meagre nibbling at the total problem of the cost of living. If the government had the backbone and had the time it could have taken a giant bite not only at food prices, but at housing and shelter costs, at clothing prices, at transportation, at health and personal care costs and even at recreational costs, all of which showed an increase in the indices published a week ago and which, as stated in the government's own press release "exceeded all other November to December increases of recent years".

The cost of living at the end of 1972, just last month, was 5.1 per cent above a year ago. The cost of food alone was up 8.6 per cent from a year ago. Housing costs were 5 per cent above a year ago and, indeed, in the long haul housing, shelter and accommodation have shown an even greater increase than food alone. Now, we are faced with the government's panacea to this crisis, and that is the establishment of a joint parliamentary committee. Perhaps this is indicative of the government's concern. Perhaps the government feels that those on fixed incomes, those on pensions and the hundreds of thousands of neglected citizens in Canada, referred to now sometimes contemptuously by Cabinet ministers as "the working poor", are not feeling any economic squeeze at the

#### *Food Prices Committee*

moment and perhaps the parliamentary inquiry will somehow satisfy their plight. I doubt it.

As a matter of fact, I think the government is 100 per cent wrong on this and I think the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) was wrong the other day when he indicated to the House that economic matters were taking a subservient place in the government's attention. I know the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) was wrong yesterday in Halifax when he said that consumers were getting a bargain in food prices and that they did not complain about the high prices of other goods in the economy today. I do not know where he has been. I have heard complaints concerning all items on the cost of living index, believe me, and not just food. I should certainly like to hear the Minister of Agriculture repeat his comment that food is a bargain before some of my constituents, some of whom are food producers.

• (1520)

If the opinions of the Minister of Agriculture are shared by his colleagues in the two front rows, I wonder why we are even considering the setting up of a committee on food prices. Why go through the exercise? The answer is simple: he is wrong and his colleagues are wrong. Food prices, like all prices, are simply running out of control today. Our whole economy is out of kilter. The government's answer to this crisis is to set up another committee. Just let me add this warning on food prices. If you want to consider it as a threat that is all right. However, I consider it to be a warning. Already this month the retail price of milk has gone up. Already this month the retail price of beef has continued to climb. Already this month, vegetable prices have increased. If the government is not panicky it should be. Next month's statistical release from the government will show these increases and others. Oil and fuel prices have already increased.

I think the publicity surrounding the formation of this committee is at best a weak-kneed effort, a heartless smokescreen to the people of this country. It is an attempt to suggest that the government is doing something about this crisis. At its very worst, it is an attempt by the government to shift its responsibility to some sort of all-party group, with the result that some of those detrimentally affected by what has happened and is now happening in respect of food costs will expect immediate, constructive action to take place. Obviously, this committee or any parliamentary committee will not be able to take action. Only the government can take action. But there will be people in this country who will believe from now on that these current and continuing price rises will be the fault of the committee, not the government.

I give the House fair warning that some of us intend to do our utmost, until some concrete, specific constructive measures are taken by this government, to lay the blame exactly where it belongs—on hon. members opposite, and particularly the ministry.

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Mr. Lawrence:** In spite of our doubts and our scepticism I am willing to admit, but only after a great deal of soul and heart searching, that we are willing to go along with the committee proposal. We will bring a constructive and