

*Food Prices Committee*

found in the tattered ranks of the vanquished, for in those ranks are only the defeated and disheartened. Our consumers need the assistance of men and women who are understanding, sympathetic and devoted to the cause of the desperate. Let us give this committee the integrity it deserves. Let it not be a vehicle for political escapism.

**Mr. John Gilbert (Broadview):** Mr. Speaker, the previous speaker, the hon. member for Okanagan Boundary (Mr. Whittaker), prompted me to make a few remarks on the motion before the House. We in the New Democratic Party support the motion that a special committee be set up to inquire into food prices and food trends and to make recommendations to the House.

I noted in the speech of the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Gray) that his attitude was one of reluctant support with regard to setting up this committee. His remarks were brief and not very stimulating. It seems he is backing into the proposition of setting up a food committee. Possibly he remembers the experience of the government in 1966-67 when a similar committee was set up to investigate food prices. The only thing of real note to come out of that committee was the setting up of a ministry of consumer and corporate affairs. This was probably a very worthy result, but very little action was taken by the government with regard to rising prices.

The substance of this motion is restricted to the question of food prices. Many hon. members would like to see the motion extended to include shelter costs and high interest rates. The attitude of the Progressive Conservative party has been most disappointing. Their attitude has been: Let the public be damned; we want power.

**Some hon. Members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Gilbert:** The substance of their speeches has been more in the nature of destructive rather than constructive criticism. When I look at the last three rows of the Conservative benches, I draw the inference that maybe they are disappointed in their front bench with regard to the ideas they have suggested for solving the problem.

One of the vital issues in the recent election campaign was the high cost of living. Any member who campaigned came in contact with this issue. He probably heard criticisms from many housewives about their experiences in the chain stores. They told us that when they went into a chain store to buy certain products, they found three or four labels on the products indicating different prices; the top label indicated 49 cents, when they removed this label they found a 39 cent label, and when they removed that they found another label with the price of 29 cents on it. This type of conduct by the food and chain stores annoys and concerns housewives. When the first attack was made on chain stores in 1966-67, they attempted to act as good corporate persons. There was an immediate drop in prices. After a month or two they started their old game of increasing prices. Prices gradually went up until today most people in Canada find them almost unbearable.

It was indicated in the recent election campaign that people with low incomes and those on fixed incomes were the hardest hit by the food prices to which we are now subjected. It would be very easy to place the blame on the farmer. I am happy that the speeches so far have suggest-

[Mr. Whittaker.]

ed that the farmers are in no way responsible for the price increases that have resulted. Studies conducted in 1949 showed that the farmer received 49 cents of the food dollar. In 1972 he received 38 cents. The inference to be drawn is that he is suffering as a result of high prices.

During the election campaign we in the New Democratic Party stated that two things should happen. First, a prices review board should be established to study the prices of various products. By dint of persuasion and government action we hope that prices will come down. If chain stores will accept their corporate and social responsibility there will be a downward trend in prices. Second, there should be an immediate investigation into food prices. Not only should there be a prices review board but there should be a study with regard to the trends that have developed, and a special study concerning chain stores.

In the last study that was made, in 1966-67, evidence was presented of the corporate chains and their sophisticated method with regard to setting up corporations which almost amount to a corporate jungle for the purpose of evading, in many instances, taxes. When you look at the corporate set-up of the various chain stores, you appreciate that they are part of a sophisticated method of avoiding taxes and that they have been able to persuade and control the public to their way of thinking.

• (2030)

The hon. member for Okanagan Boundary suggested that the consumer was responsible for the type of packages we now see in the stores. Can you imagine laying the blame on the average housewife for having three or four different sized boxes for different soaps, three or four different sizes for cereals, three or four different sizes for toothpaste and three or four different sizes for coffee?

**Some hon. Members:** Sure.

**Mr. Gilbert:** The average housewife goes into the store, determines the number of ounces in a package in relation to the price and then calculate which is the better buy.

**An hon. Member:** There is probably no difference.

**Mr. Gilbert:** If we had some uniformity in respect of packaging and an indication of the price per ounce that an individual was paying, this would be of great assistance to the housewife. We are all aware of the advertising techniques and gimmicks that chain stores indulge in. Hon. members well know that Dominion Stores advertise that it is "mainly because of the meat". Other chain stores suggest they have "deep discount" prices. Every Wednesday and Thursday the newspapers are filled with advertising in an attempt to persuade the innocent housewife to go into the store and take advantage of these deep discount prices when, in fact, the majority of the prices are fixed or predetermined by the corporation before the goods even go on the shelf. Those prices bear very little or no resemblance to the actual cost of producing the article. These are some of the things we feel the committee should study in depth in the over-all study of rising food prices in Canada.

**An hon. Member:** The same old story.