

Food Prices Committee

The other night I watched a television program called Viewpoint which comes on after the eleven o'clock news. Ruth Fremes spoke about consumer selection. She pointed out the options open to the shopper, and this is something we should bring out very strongly in the committee hearings. Perhaps we could have at the committee someone such as this lady, who was articulate and a home economist, someone who speaks to women in women's language and does not turn men off. Such a person could tell the committee about the choices we have.

If we need a certain amount of vitamins, we can get them in frozen orange juice at four cents an ounce, say, or in half a grapefruit at five cents. There is nothing wrong in sending out for pizza or Kentucky fried chicken, but it is not shopping. The choice is yours, as a consumer, and if you want frozen everything you can have it; but then do not say that you do not understand why food costs so much. The cost is rising because we want things prepared in different ways and in easier packages.

In the middle of the election campaign I remember one day going into the Ponderosa steakhouse when a mother came in with a family to buy inexpensive steaks—inexpensive by restaurant standards. She might have had good reason, of course, but I was shocked. It is easy for men to talk, because they do not have to stand over the stove, but still we must put these things in some sort of perspective.

Mr. Speaker, we have to see to it in this House that senior citizens have a fair chance in these periods of spiralling inflation. The rest of society can roll with it—can eat something else or go somewhere else. If everything were easy, fresh frozen and ready to go, life would be dull for us. But senior citizens do not have that flexibility; they cannot raise their income or go somewhere else, and they have to contend with rising food and drug costs. Sometimes the big question for them is whether to get proper medication or proper food. We have a special obligation to these people and we can discharge part of it by looking after the pension increase. But part of it we will have to deal with in the committee. Consideration of these obligations will help the whole of society and will help us get our priorities straight.

• (2040)

If each time we think of this problem, we think of senior citizens and those on fixed income who have to make a trade off between medication and nutrition, we will admit, if we are honest with ourselves, that we must examine this problem. That is why the remarks of the hon. member for Yorkton-Melville were most interesting. He began to articulate, in an eloquent manner, the problems of the farmer. We have heard such speeches before. Certainly the hon. member has mentioned these problems many times, as have other hon. members such as the hon. member for Crowfoot (Mr. Horner) and other distinguished members of the House who have spoken on behalf of farmers.

An hon. Member: They have not spoken well, but they have spoken.

Mr. Danson: Yes, they have not spoken well, but they have spoken. I do not think you will see farmers getting

[Mr. Danson.]

rich because of high food costs. I remember last year we debated, with the hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway, the entire question of food distribution and retail costs and costs associated with chain stores. There was some confusion in the minds of hon. members over the question of profits. There was a price war which didn't make for logical comparison. In some instances it actually lowered prices but raised the profits of an individual chain because its sales increased immensely. However, profits over-all have not increased at the same rate. We have not looked at the middleman, as the hon. member for Yorkton-Melville said, or the processor and distributor. Studies have been made in this area and it would be worth our while taking another look at it. I was surprised at the hon. member for Yorkton-Melville, an NDP member, referring to the middleman. I think we ought to call him the middle-person. I think that is male chauvinism at its worst.

The hon. member for Bruce mentioned one major United States-based food chain. He did not mention the one that is coming to the east from the west. May I say, without using any trade names, that this great chain that is coming to eastern Canada from western Canada is bringing a breath of fresh air with it. We are seeing our eastern chains being challenged by people who treat their customers as human beings. They care about them and appreciate them as customers. Perhaps we ought to talk about that also.

The other problem we must consider is the multiplicity of sizes and shapes with which we must contend. At one time, small sizes of anything were called sample sizes. Now they start as giant sizes; then there are the super-giant and magnificent-giant sizes. On the store shelves we find Whiz and Wham and Woof and Bam, each in ten different sizes. The poor retailer needs a mile-long shelf to handle all these sizes. That does not seem sensible in this modern day and age. Then, as well, we must consider increases in commodity prices. The price of coffee in Brazil might go up by two cents a pound, but back here in the supermarket the clerks immediately rush around to mark coffee prices up by ten cents a pound at the retail level before the coffee beans have even been taken off the bushes in Brazil.

An hon. Member: Include plastics, too.

Mr. Danson: I include plastics. Of course, there may be reasons for these sharp increases in costs; the chain may have lost money through decreases in prices of other foods. Nevertheless, let us find out how valid those arguments are, I suggest because prices are raised with indecent haste. We cannot look at this sort of thing in isolation, because it is part of a total, specific and visible problem. We want answers. We do not want to use this committee for playing games to see who is to be in government and who is not. Those sorts of games will be played soon enough. The committee must seek to serve the purposes of our senior citizens and others who are caught in the squeeze where they must make a trade-off—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I regret to interrupt the hon. member, but the time allotted to him, as provided by order made earlier today, has expired unless he has unanimous consent to continue.