

Farm Loans

Mr. Whelan: The reporter did not write the whole story or you would have had a better understanding.

Mr. Epp: You also run the CBC.

An hon. Member: We wonder.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I should remind the hon. member to address his remarks to the Chair.

Mr. Epp: I appreciate that admonition and I am sure the Chair did not direct it to the Minister of Agriculture.

● (1650)

Seriously, what I am saying is that there must be more understanding throughout Canada of what is happening on the farm front. There are many farmers in our constituencies today who have loans they had been hoping they would be able to dispose of within a 12-month period. They are now carrying those loans for two and three years. They have not been able to pay them off, and without lower interest rates, no matter how good a farmer might be, no matter how good a manager he might be and no matter how long his farm has been in his family, he will not survive. He cannot survive under the present conditions, and no matter how good a job the Minister of Agriculture might feel he is doing, those are the realities farmers face today.

I am not even referring to young farmers who have mortgages over their ears they are trying to pay. I am talking about farmers who are in good equity positions, who have been farming for a number of years and who thought their equity was building so that they would have something for their retirement. Suddenly they are selling off equity to pay for credit they need for their operations.

Some people will tell those of us who are participating in this debate that if we are in favour of this bill we should send it to the committee; but it is important that we use the opportunity of this debate in the House to show Canadians what is actually happening to farmers. People see on their television screens at night the news that some farmers are irritated. They are going to their banks and taking action farmers are not in the habit of taking. They are not doing this because they enjoy taking those actions. They are taking those actions because they are being driven to it. This is serious. This is very serious in terms of the future of the Canadian farmer, and I suggest none of us would be protected from the whirlwind which would be unleashed if Canadian farmers could not operate any longer.

There might be some in this House who will say that as an opposition member all I am trying to do is create a straw man I can knock down. No, that is not what I am trying to do. I spoke to farmers during the Christmas break. I spoke to people who have been in business for 30 and 40 years. They have two fears. "How can I put my crop in next year and be able to pay for it?" Second, "Will I have enough retirement income at the end of my working life so that somebody else can continue farming and I can live in dignity?" Those are the two questions they are asking.

When we look at the whole question of farm borrowings or the need for cash flow or financial resources, it is not traditional to look only at land, buildings and machinery. We must also look at lines of credit.

On the matter of high interest rates, I attended the federal-provincial conference this morning. Perhaps the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) felt he did not have too many friends around that table. The premiers have varying political stripes, but what they were saying were the same things people were saying to the Conservative Party's committee on the budget and the economy as it toured the country during the Christmas break. The first issue to which people referred was not the budget. That was second. The first issue to which they referred was the issue of high interest rates. The budget compounded the problem.

What was said this morning? I will not read in detail what was said this morning. The meeting went on for a long time. The Chair would not give me the amount of time I would need to read everything in detail, but the Premier of Alberta said that what we need for a national economic recovery strategy is, first, a made-in-Canada interest rate policy. The Premier of Saskatchewan, obviously of a different political stripe from that of the Premier of Alberta, said that we need the immediate adoption of a made-in-Canada monetary policy of lower and stable interest rates. Just to encourage the Minister of Agriculture further, the Premier of Saskatchewan also said that the introduction of effective national stabilization programs for Canadian beef and hog producers is needed.

Hon. members might think that the Premier of Ontario is the premier of a province which is highly urbanized.

Mr. Whelan: He did not even mention farmers.

Mr. Epp: If the minister wants to speak—although it has been difficult to listen to him in the past—I am sure we would allow him to be heard again. The Premier of Ontario said we cannot follow the narrow pursuit of American interest rates.

What did the Premier of Prince Edward Island say? Oh, we can say that there are only 110,000 people in Prince Edward Island, but those people are Canadians and agriculture is vital to that province. A former premier of that province sits here, and I do not have to convince him of that. The Premier of Prince Edward Island said:

Farmers, like all businessmen across the country, are facing the real hardship of high interest rates. Most provinces, except ours, have the fiscal flexibility to subsidize interest to the farmer. We suggest as an alternative to varying degrees of provincial support, that the federal government, through the Farm Credit Corporation, alleviate this burden by providing credit at more reasonable interest rates to our primary producers. This policy would allow our farm community a more equitable opportunity to compete.

That is what the Premier of Prince Edward Island said, and that is what is being said across the street. It is being said in this House but, more importantly, it is being said on every main street in rural Canada. It is being said in every coffee shop.

An hon. Member: And in beer parlours.