

Food Prices

were very glad to see included in the Speech from the Throne the definite promise of a committee to make a special study of trends in food prices. That committee was set up, with an interim report called for within 60 days.

I am not going at this time into the various channels we went through and the various motions and amendments made to get the committee set up. Nor am I going into the problems which we encountered in the committee. At first there was a very great disposition on the part of a number of members of the committee to think it was nothing but a farce, a circus or a witch hunt; I believe those terms are accurately reported. But as time went on all members of the food prices committee began to feel that public and media alike were concerned and interested, not only in what was going on, but that there be a worth-while report recommending some type of definite action at the end of the interim period of 60 days.

From the outset the NDP members on that committee—my colleagues from Saskatoon-Biggar (Mr. Gleave), Toronto-Lakeshore (Mr. Grier), and at times Waterloo-Cambridge (Mr. Salzman)—stated that we felt two particular recommendations should be included in the report. One was for a prices review board; the other was for immediate measures to put proper food on the tables of people on low incomes, people who cannot wait for endless studies or determinations of trends before action is taken to prevent deteriorating quality of nutrition for their families.

The result of our investigations in the food prices committee was to put both of those recommendations in our report, and I shall be dealing with them both. But first, I want to make the point that this is a majority report. Most of the members on the food prices committee are going along with the report. Apparently the Progressive Conservative members did not go along with it, although today no one knows, least of all themselves, exactly where they stand on the matter. Certainly, I am hoping that this day's debate will bring about some enlightenment in that regard.

Apparently the Progressive Conservatives were going to give us that enlightenment when the report was tabled, but the press conference that they scheduled was cancelled, presumably because they just had not been able to make up their minds what they wanted to say or had failed to restrict themselves to at least two or three points of view. They then issued three press statements—not one, not two, but three. Their first press statement was to the effect that they disagreed with the main report. They wanted a 90-day freeze all the way across the board, with no ifs, ands, buts or exceptions. Their second press report was to the effect they had suddenly discovered that it was not fair to leave farmers in their 90-day freeze, so they said everyone but the farmers ought to be subject to a 90 day freeze on prices. Their second press statement made it abundantly clear that their across the board freeze would leave out the farmers.

Mr. Atkey: We did not say that.

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway): Well, I can see there will be lots of scope for elucidation and clarification in this debate, something I very much hope to hear as we go along.

[Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway).]

Their third press statement was a little more—the word that comes to my mind is “wonky”. They did not oppose the first report in total because they agreed that it offered protection to the farmers and they believed that the farmers should be protected. I am hoping that this debate will show where they really stand on this matter, if indeed they do stand at all. Sometimes I think there are about as many varieties of Tories as there are varieties in the famous 67 brands of Heinz.

Mr. Danforth: You are wrong there too; it is 57.

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway): I come now to the major cornerstone recommendation of our report, which is the recommendation that we set up a prices review board. I am going to read the recommendation that we made in our interim report:

The Committee recommends:

1. That the government give consideration to the advisability of introducing the necessary legislation to establish an independent Food Prices Review Board equipped with such powers as are necessary to review prices, and that it report to the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs. In its reports to the minister, the board could make recommendations concerning appropriate action to be taken.

In addition, periodic reports to the Food Prices Review Board may be referred to a standing committee of the House. The board shall have the authority to incorporate in its periodic reports, a request to appear before the said standing committee.

After a report is referred, the committee would have authority to call the board before it.

The point that I want to make is that, as far as we in this corner are concerned, everything depends not on the government merely accepting this recommendation, not on the government merely concurring with the fact that it is a good thing, but on the willingness of the government to introduce concrete legislation now to spell out the intent of the recommendation. I am going to indicate what kind of flesh we believe should be put on the skeleton of this recommendation.

• (1600)

I realize there are members of the committee who believe, investigation, publicity and moral suasion are enough in such legislation if it should be introduced, but we in our party have no confidence whatsoever in legislation of that type to deal with this particular situation. We have been through that exercise before. We remember the saga of the late unlamented Prices and Incomes Commission, a saga that can be told in precious few words: Three years, \$3 million, an undetermined amount of paper and whitewash with prices and incomes going up at the end of the whole process. So we have no desire whatsoever to go through the exercise again of setting up a board which would merely depend on investigation, volumes of paper, whitewash and publicity, with the feeling that moral suasion would protect the consumer from elements of the food chain.

I want to say now that we are not going along with or giving sanction to that kind of legislation because it will not be worth the paper it is printed on. The people of this country do not deserve to be led down the garden path a second time, having been led down that path for awhile in the belief that the Prices and Incomes Commission was going to do something. We have no intention in this party