

Government Orders

The third point that needs to be made is with regard to why this program is so slow evolving, this very desperately needed program for financial assistance. Members from the prairies, on all sides of the House, I am sure are getting calls daily from very desperate farmers. In spite of his very obvious qualities, abilities, and skills, I think the time has come when the Prime Minister needs to look at whether or not we should have a full time Minister of Agriculture. I know the kind of clout that Minister of Agriculture has is certainly worth-while to farmers. On the other hand, we have been dragging on for four months with an obvious crisis. We seem to be no closer to being able to make the decisions and carry on the consultations that will put this money in the hands of farmers. It is time to consider very seriously whether or not the agriculture load, the massive crisis, and the need for a full scale policy review, doesn't require that the country have a full time Minister of Agriculture.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina—Lumsden): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to take part in this debate, but I wish we did not have to.

I am a child of the Dirty Thirties. All during the war and following the war, the struggle that went on by the farm community and the provinces to get some kind of a crop insurance program took years of doing. Federal governments of those years were persuaded to launch such a program. Initially, the provinces agreed to pay all the administration costs, including the crop insurance inspectors. The federal government and the farmers shared fifty-fifty in the premiums.

There is an old saying: "If it is working, don't try to fix it". All that needed fixing was additional kinds of coverage. This bill follows the same pattern as a number of other items of legislation. The government is following through on what it said about giving the provinces more say, more participation, and more involvement. What that really means is shifting the costs of programs that are a federal government responsibility, no one else's, onto the provinces. In some cases, it even shifts costs of the federal government's not only on to the provinces, but on to municipalities and on to individual farmers.

One thing that bothers me about this bill is that of all the times to bring about this kind of change, it is not now. If we had good crops and prices were good and what not, there might be some validity that farmers could afford to

pay more. I look at some of the premium increases that will affect people like tomato growers and winter wheat growers and so on at a time when prices are depressed, particularly on wheat. The nicest thing I can say is that the government's sense of timing is that it is about as bad as it can be.

If you had good times, if you were going to make this change and it was one that you were committed to ideologically—part of your government's policy—one would be more hard put to argue. But it should not be an occasion when my province of Saskatchewan is in as bad a financial and economic condition as it was in 1938. If you transferred the situation into the 1990s, in terms of dollars or anything else—in fact, in many respects because we have a lot more things now to worry about than we had in 1938—we are worse off in 1990 than we were in 1938.

Our province is bankrupt. Its bond rating was reduced recently, and that is going to be happening some more. I remember, following the end of the war, my province could not borrow a nickel anywhere in the private market. My province was faced with every farmer having seed grain debts going back to the early thirties. There was no hope of getting enough money to pay them off. Every municipality had relief debts, payments made out to farm families all over the prairies in those years. We recovered from that during the war and the first number of years afterwards because we were feeding the whole world that had been devastated by war in Europe and Asia.

In light of what our neighbours to the south of us and the European Economic Community are doing, all their talk about free trade and getting rid of tariff barriers is sheer nonsense. When it comes to the crunch they are the first ones to protect themselves and to heck with a country like Canada, and we fall for it.

This bill is going to cost the federal government less and it is going to cost the provinces more. No matter what political stripe of my province—at the moment it is a conservative one—is in debt something over \$3 billion. That is about as bad as it was in 1938 if you translate the then debt into 1990 dollars. So we are in the same shape.

Now the federal government is going to pick up half the administration costs. Before the provinces paid all the administration costs. The federal government is going to pay half of the administration costs and the provinces are going to pay half. In exchange, if you can