

Increasing Food Prices

to report back by June 26 in order that some action can be taken, if action is found to be necessary by the committee. Without taking up any more of your time, Mr. Speaker, I respectfully submit that the hon. member for Parry Sound-Muskoka (Mr. Aiken) was not right in saying that the amendment did not deal with the principle of the motion but merely the means. That is a brief and accurate way of saying the amendment does not do what he was arguing at all. The amendment changes the entire thrust of the motion which is for an inquiry by a committee of this parliament into rising prices and the profits of supermarkets, and not by some agency set up by the government somewhere. The two things are entirely different in principle, and I respectfully suggest that the doubts which you had were fully justified.

Mr. Woolliams: Mr. Speaker, as I read the motion it says:

That, in the opinion of this House, the government has failed to cope with the problem of steadily rising food prices—

That seems to be the main thrust of the motion, the increase in the cost of food. One may blame it on the supermarkets or co-ops which handle food stuffs, or on anybody else, but the real thrust of the motion, as I see it, is to deal with rising food prices. What remedy have we got? The remedy the NDP recommend, and it has some merit, is that the matter be referred to a standing committee of this House. The hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) has suggested that the matter be referred to the Prices and Incomes Commission. It is just a case of which remedy to adopt. In other words, Mr. Speaker, let us put it on a legal basis. It is a question of whether to refer a matter to the district court or to the Supreme Court trial division. It is only a matter of remedies. I would therefore ask you to consider the amendment in order. It does not change the substance of the motion at all. It only deals with the remedy, with how to arrive at a solution of the problem which has been placed before the House today by the New Democratic Party.

Mr. Broadbent: Mr. Speaker, I would like to comment briefly on the observations of the hon. member for Calgary North (Mr. Woolliams). With respect, as one says here, I think he has misinterpreted the essence of the motion. The motion is not, as he would suggest, simply intended to deal with the problem of steadily rising food prices, but rather makes the specific suggestion that this problem is directly connected in some way with the simultaneous rise in supermarket profits. In other words, in the judgment of the mover of the motion these are not two separate factors. The mover obviously intended that the subject matters be combined, the matter of rising food prices and the related fact of increased supermarket profits. It would be incorrect to suggest that the motion only accidentally combines these two ideas. The one is inextricably linked with the other.

The second suggestion made by the hon. member for Calgary North (Mr. Woolliams) is that it does not matter which body looks into the situation, the Prices and Incomes Commission or a special committee of the House of Commons. I suggest that there is a world of difference. For many months, members of the NDP have made it abundantly clear that we hold the operations of the Prices

and Incomes Commission to be of considerably low repute. We would not recommend to the House that that body look into food prices, or indeed into the prices of any other commodity. Therefore the mover of the motion decided that it would be much more appropriate to have a committee composed of the elected representatives of the people of Canada look at this question, and not the Prices and Incomes Commission. That is a fundamental difference which is overlooked by the hon. member for Calgary North.

There is a third area of difference between the original motion and the proposed amendment. The original motion calls for a report to the House, perhaps not a definitive, all inclusive report, but some kind of report, by the end of June. The amendment, completely contrary to that, calls for a report much later in the year. Therefore, I respectfully suggest that the amendment should not be accepted.

Mr. McGrath: Mr. Speaker, I have heard the arguments, and I was particularly interested in the remarks of the hon. member for York South (Mr. Lewis). I can only conclude that he was not present in the House or, if he was present, that he was not listening when I made my speech, because I made it very clear that we were concerned with the rising profits of supermarkets. However, I said that was only a factor. It may be a substantial factor, but there are other factors as well which the motion proposed by the hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway (Mrs. MacInnis) excludes. We were merely trying to make this motion a serious one because, as it is now worded, it is a two-pronged motion attempting to do two different things. It is concerned with the rise in food prices, and it expresses concern at rising supermarket profits. They are two different things, although related, and probably one contributes to the other.

The key word in the motion is the word "or" where it says:

—in the opinion of this House, the government has failed to cope with the problem of steadily rising food prices, which seriously affect Canadian living standards, or with the fact that supermarket profits have increased simultaneously—

I maintained in my argument that the increase in profits was a contributing factor to the rise in food prices but that there were other contributing factors also, such as those I stated in my speech, for example, transportation.

The other point I would respectfully draw to your attention is the argument I used in my speech that this matter has already been studied by a joint committee of the two houses of Parliament, which took a year in its deliberations, and it was studied by a royal commission, which took two years in its deliberations. We question the seriousness of what the hon. member hopes to achieve when she says that she hopes to have this study completed in two weeks.

• (1620)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. With respect, the hon. member was arguing the substance of the matter. Are there any other hon. members who would like to assist the Chair?

[Mr. Lewis.]