

Oral Questions

and discuss the possibility of holding a conference on the economy at some future date.

Mr. Nielsen: May I suggest to the Deputy Prime Minister that the suggestion of the Premiers that an agenda be set for a full scale summit on the economy has considerable merit and should be considered favourably by the Prime Minister and the Government.

PLIGHT OF UNEMPLOYED

Hon. Erik Nielsen (Leader of the Opposition): Madam Speaker, I ask the Minister, in his capacity as Deputy Prime Minister, whether he can give the House and the country, and particularly the two million unemployed, the assurance that the tragedy of their situation will be placed high on the agenda of such federal-provincial discussions concerning the tragic state of the Canadian economy, rather than being placed somewhere in between the vichyssoise and the filet mignon?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for External Affairs): Madam Speaker, the Hon. Member is aware that the Minister of Finance has already met with his counterparts in December and he will be meeting again with them in Toronto next month.

Mr. Crosbie: He does not have any counterpart. There is only one of him!

Mr. MacEachen: At the same time, the Minister of State for Economic Development has been meeting with his counterparts, as has the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce. Therefore, at the forefront of the ongoing consultations between the Governments at the ministerial level has been the economic situation existing in the country. These consultations will continue.

What the Prime Minister is stating to the Premiers is that, after the constitutional conference, in the evening, and the following morning if necessary, he is prepared to discuss with the Premiers the question of the economy and, in the context of the consultations which have already taken place, to consider the possibility at some future date of holding a First Ministers' Conference on the economy. Therefore I assure the Hon. Member that the economic situation is at the forefront of these discussions and will continue at the forefront. However, I am sure that the Leader of the Opposition would not want to have a repeat of the First Ministers' Conference on the economy which was held just about a year ago.

Mr. Epp: It was honest. Take a look at the policy.

Mr. Nielsen: We are not discussing anything other than the initiative of the Prime Minister in extending an invitation to the Premiers to discuss the economy. The disappointment of the Premiers lies in the fact that they are being expected to discuss the tragic proportions of that problem between the vichyssoise and the filet mignon.

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

• (1420)

Mr. Nielsen: I ask the Deputy Prime Minister, with all of that background of experience that he has not only as a parliamentarian and as a Minister, but given the expertise that he has accumulated as Finance Minister, whether he does not consider it fit and proper at this time that this immense, tragic problem of unemployment should receive top priority in a federal-provincial conference of the Prime Minister and the Premiers? Does he not think that such a conference should be held at the earliest possible moment and, if necessary, take one or two or three days to bring about some solutions to the problem? Does he not think that the problem is important enough to warrant that kind of focus?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. MacEachen: Madam Speaker, I think the Hon. Member is seriously underestimating the state of mind of the Premiers who, he thinks, would be put off simply by the appearance of filet mignon on the table at 24 Sussex Drive.

What the Prime Minister has suggested is to have a meeting at 24 Sussex Drive, over dinner, on the night after the First Ministers' Conference on the Constitution, to have a review of the economic situation, and if in the view of the Premiers a further discussion is necessary the following morning—

Mr. Nielsen: Is there any doubt?

Mr. MacEachen:—then that will take place. The Premiers were already notified as to the possibility of continuing the discussion the following morning at 24 Sussex Drive. That will give the Prime Minister and the Premiers an opportunity to conduct a rather intense examination of the economic situation in private, rather than being distracted at a public television ceremony, which is often intended to impress the electorate rather than deal with the economic problems facing the country.

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AGRICULTURE

PROVINCIAL TASK FORCE ON BEEF STABILIZATION

Mr. G. M. Gurbin (Bruce-Grey): Madam Speaker, my question is directed to the Minister of Agriculture. He will know that in the absence of any federal leadership the Ministers of Agriculture of the Provinces have named a task force that will look at a national program for income stabilization in support of beef and other agricultural commodities. I would like to ask the Minister if he is prepared to support that task force, if he will name his representative to it, and if he will put the resources of the federal Government behind the findings of that task force.

Hon. E. F. Whelan (Minister of Agriculture): Madam Speaker, I am very much aware that a meeting took place in