

Farm Products Marketing Agencies Bill

[English]

Mr. John Burton (Regina East): Mr. Speaker, considering the history of agriculture in Canada and the present situation of farmers in this country together with the future prospects for farmers and rural people, I would have thought that when the minister introduced Bill C-197 it would have been presented as a brave new step forward in solving some of the very serious problems which face farmers and rural people in Canada. Instead, we find that this bill was introduced with hesitation, uncertainty and indeed with a faltering step.

In reviewing the remarks of the minister when introducing the bill on second reading, one almost gains the impression that he was not quite sure where he was going and just what he wanted to do with this legislation after it was passed, assuming it is passed; and, finally, one gains the impression that he was not completely convinced of the merit of the legislation. Of course, if he says otherwise I will have to accept his word and I will do so without hesitation. Nevertheless, I was rather unhappy with the presentation that the minister made in introducing this bill. I intend to have something more to say on that matter later in my remarks.

I certainly do not underestimate or downgrade the difficulties and complexities of Canada's agricultural marketing situation, because there is no question that agricultural marketing policies across Canada have been a great source of uncertainty and confusion. We have had a wide range of policies, divided jurisdiction and disagreement on policies among both farmers and governments, which have contributed to this picture. It seems to me that marketing boards are essential in order to strengthen farm bargaining power in the economy. The fact is that governments have often dragged their feet in this area and further steps toward orderly marketing are long overdue.

I suggest that federal legislation is needed to establish the machinery for national marketing with which provincial producer-controlled marketing boards could conform and thereby be able to market products in any part of Canada or on the export markets. A related matter has to do with the principle of supporting prices and a variety of techniques, some of which have been used from time to time in Canada. However, often the expenditures have involved help for those who needed help the least and it has been suggested that support plans should be based on

[Mr. Godin.]

income instead. Such plans will certainly need to be co-ordinated with whatever adjustment programs the government eventually brings forward.

An essential requirement of any or all marketing plans is that farmers have advance notice of price levels and quantities to be bought at a specified price. These need to be worked out in negotiation with farmers and farm organizations. This would be of tremendous help to the farmers. By negotiation I mean meaningful negotiation. I suggest that this would be a guide to a voluntary system of supply management. I suggest that stepped up economic research and improved market information are further steps in developing a program of production planning and supply management. Some marketing agencies now have a fairly well-developed system of supply management. The processing industries, it has to be acknowledged, adopt the principle of supply management in various contract arrangements.

The question might be asked: Why not supply management? The basic idea is simple and sensible enough, but it is not that simple in practice. There are very complex and difficult problems to overcome. The whole problem of how to implement supply management is yet to be resolved and the government, through its performance in operation LIFT, has given every indication that it has not learned any of the lessons necessary.

That does not mean that we should throw up our hands and give up, but it does mean that we will not find overnight solutions in dealing with what is admittedly a very difficult problem. I think we need to examine the situation of agriculture as such in considering this bill because, after all, the industry is expected to operate within the framework of a true free enterprise economy and there are few other sectors of the economy which are expected to operate on this basis. Because agriculture and a few other small industries have been forced to operate on this basis, to operate at a disadvantage when compared with other sectors of the economy, the industry has suffered and the people who make their livelihood in that industry have also suffered.

The basic fact is that the Canadian economy has undergone drastic changes. Today we live essentially in a managed economy, and at the same time the government and many in this country still espouse the platitudes of an economic system that no longer exists. Agriculture is expected to operate on the