

Mr. Lawrence: If my hon. friends want to dispute that there are grave disparities in some sectors of our economy, disparities that are readily apparent not only geographically but on an occupation basis as well, then that is obviously up to them. Our farmers are an excellent example of those caught on the inflationary treadmill which exists today. The higher costs to farmers of all of their inputs—their fuel, equipment, capital investment, all their maintenance and running costs, even their own food costs—have grown beyond belief in the last few years. These costs have accelerated in the last few months. Even though the price at the farm gate—by that I mean the selling price by the primary producer of his raw, fresh, unprocessed product—has risen. The farmer on this accelerating treadmill has never been quite able to catch up.

However, the farmer is not unique in this situation. The fisherman, the small manufacturer, the retailer, those in the service industries—everyone is on that escalating treadmill; and the harder the individual runs, the sooner he finds that his goal of a more comfortable existence and a more efficient operation is just as far beyond his grasp. Left far behind, without the means or ability to even run to keep up, but with the treadmill working against them as against all others, are those on fixed incomes, those on pensions and the so-called working poor. Clearly, this situation has to be brought under control before further unfair disparities are created.

Against this background, and clearly because it was unwilling or unable to act in a constructive manner two months ago when conditions were slightly better than they are now, this government set up the food prices committee. Those of us on this side of the House in the Conservative party said at that time that this was an unfair and discriminatory move, that only one extremely complex industry was being singled out by the government for publicity and investigation at a time when obviously the whole consumer price index was rising, not just the food price index. We said that government action, not parliamentary investigation, was needed. We said at that time that it was a barefaced government delaying manoeuvre, and we were right.

This is why we in this party wish to dissociate ourselves from the first interim report of the committee studying food price trends. The report should deal with the whole problem of inflation, of which food prices are only a part. In recommending a toothless, awkward and obscure food prices review board as its main proposal, we believe that the Liberal and NDP members of the committee are certainly not facing the facts of life in Canada today.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Lawrence: Such a body would only be unrealistic and administratively cumbersome and expensive. But, more important, it is unreal and unfair to deal with food prices alone when the basic problem facing Canada is the high cost of government and rising prices in all sectors of the economy.

I think it might be of interest to the House, and especially to the loud-mouthed individuals to my left, to find out just how the NDP were sucked in. The hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway (Mrs. MacInnis)—I am glad to see

Food Prices

that she is in the House tonight—came to that committee with a preconceived idea of exactly what she wanted. I bear her no ill will for that. She wanted, and she has always wanted, a food prices review board.

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver Kingsway): And so has our party.

Mr. Lawrence: But the Liberal chairman—I am glad to see him here tonight also—obviously fearful of his government's inactivity and the fact that that inactivity was starting to hurt, came up with the idea of a food prices monitoring board—that was the name of it—which would have no real powers but would look at food prices, would report to the minister and would be an information gathering body. The trap was set. The NDP grabbed at the bait. The deal was made, even though the NDP had been speaking about a food prices review board which would have the power to investigate, which would have the power to make a decision and which would have the power to roll back a price increase when the board felt the increase was unwarranted. All of this went out the window. What we have is a toothless, supposedly independent board but one which reports to the minister and is dependent on the minister for funds. Some independence! It is an advisory body only; it makes no decisions itself; it has no power to make anyone do anything.

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In my own view, the powers originally requested by the NDP would be too great for such a body in any event. But this façade as presented to us is simply a toothless body, a charade, something like Dr. Young's Prices and Incomes Commission, which is designed to give the appearance that something is being done. Nothing could be done by this group. What it did, Sir, was to suck in the NDP. It really is a monitoring board, but simply because the name was changed the NDP agreed to it and apparently are going to be agreeing to it even tonight.

It will do nothing to alleviate any price increase. It has no power. Indeed, the recommendation is so vague, and the minister's reply that "a review mechanism will be announced before the end of this month" fits in so perfectly with his equally woolly-worded response, that it is no wonder that this procrastinating, dilly-dallying government would agree with the report as presented to us tonight. The Liberals agree with it because there is nothing in it, and obviously the NDP agree with it because they are afraid to disagree with the Liberals.

I just want to say this to you, Mr. Speaker. There has been much talk around here lately about elections. If the government is looking for an issue to go to the country on, this is it. This is their golden chance, their golden opportunity. And by golly, Sir, I challenge them to do so. Look at how it fits in. They sucked in the NDP. They have got the Social Credit on their side. If they are looking for an issue in an election, why not this—a toothless, awkward prices review board? The NDP irrevocably committed themselves to it. The Social Credit has done the same. If the government thinks it is a good idea, then it has those two groups with it. We differ, and we are quite willing to meet this challenge on the hustings. If the government has