

Increased Cost of Living

ployment is that our economy is no longer competitive. That is what he said. I agree with him entirely. I merely find it very difficult to understand why he supports an economy that grows more and more monopolistic and therefore unable to deal with the real needs of the Canadian people. That is the basic difference between his very thoughtful approach to the problem and the approach which we of the New Democratic Party take.

He says blithely in his speech that countries have been hurt by inflation of this level. I do not know what decade he is talking about. If he is talking about the decade of the 1920's, there is no doubt he is right. But if he is talking about the decade of the 1960's and 1970's, I challenge him to give us an example of that kind of nonsense. Is he talking about Japan? Has its economy gone to pot? Is he talking about Germany? Has its economy gone to pot? Is he talking about any of the western European countries? The fact is, of course, that when you have rising prices throughout the world internationally—I am speaking now not from the point of view of Canadians who are hurt, and I will come back to that point in a moment, but from the point of view of the economy as an economy and from the view of our position internationally—and if the prices in your country are not rising at a level higher than the general situation your economy, in fact, is not hurt. Indeed, the fact is that Canada has not been hurt internationally. If that is the case, then what on earth is he talking about?

The Minister of Finance has already cited from the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield) a quotation which had been drawn to my attention earlier today, but let me say in general terms that the Leader of the Opposition and members of the Conservative party twitted the government for having a kind of paranoia about inflation, for being preoccupied with inflation and for being obsessed with inflation. The Conservative party spokesmen then were right because one can easily become obsessed with this question in the terms in which the hon. member for Don Valley spoke. The hon. member for Don Valley and the members of the Conservative party today are making precisely the same mistake. They are attempting to impose, if they had the opportunity, a freeze that is meaningless and undefined which would cause immense harm to a large part of the people of Canada, never mind the economy as a whole, and which would, in the first instance, be of particular harm to the farmers of this country.

I have said many times when addressing farm meetings, which I have had the pleasure of doing for many years, that I do not claim to be a farmer but I do claim to know a little about the situation in respect of our farm population in this country. For some three or four years, from about 1969 to 1972 inclusive, the farmers of this country, perhaps like the farmers in many other parts of the world but particularly in this country, were getting the raw end of the stick. Their prices were too low, their costs of production were rising all the time and they were being squeezed by international prices on the one hand which, they could not control, and on the other hand by the cost of production, which they could not control. Their income fell continually year by year. I say as one urban person in this country that if the consumers of Canada were paying higher prices for food only because the farmer was at least

[Mr. Lewis.]

getting a decent price for his products, the consumers of Canada would have no right to complain.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Lewis: This is were I part company with the Minister of Finance because my observation of the situation in Canada with regard to food prices and other prices, which I will come to in a moment, is that the purchaser in the supermarket and in other food stores does not pay a higher price now merely because the farmer is at last getting a decent price for his products. The consumer is also paying a higher price because of the monopolistic control of the food packaging, because of the waste in food advertising and packaging and because of the monopolistic control over the processing of food and the monopolistic control by the supermarkets in this country which gouge consumers beyond the point where it would be justified to raise prices because of the farmers' income.

I often go shopping with my wife. Time and time again she has drawn my attention to the fact that she picks a tin of something off the shelf which has a price and a label on it, that she then takes that label off and finds under it another price five cents lower and then takes that label off and finds a third price ten cents lower again. What that means is that the supermarket has had that tin on its shelf for months. It was brought in at a low price and the merchant is now taking advantage of the situation to get what the traffic will bear by gouging the housewife unnecessarily when she goes shopping. It is this kind of consideration that has made us demand a food prices review board and indeed a prices review board generally, if we could have one, because what you would have then would be an agency that would look into the reason for the increased prices; you would be able to expose the unfairness that exists. That is what we should be after. We should be able to expose the unjustifiable increase.

As I will suggest in a moment, Mr. Speaker, if the government took the necessary step, then somebody would have the authority to do something about the situation when prices have been unfairly raised. Everyone in this chamber, when he talks about inflation, is concerned, genuinely I believe—I do not for one moment question the integrity of the hon. member for Don Valley any more than I hope he questions mine—about the low income people in this country. There is one simple, decent, humane, moral way of dealing with that problem, and that is to raise the income of the low income people of this country—

● (1610)

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Lewis: To enter into a massive system of price, wage and incomes control—and I will come back to that in a moment—to enter into a massive system that will freeze injustices where they are and that will create divisions, and to suggest a 90 day freeze during which you can do nothing at all except wait for the whole thing to blow up when the 90 days are over, all in order to assist the low income people, is nonsense. The fact is that the old age pensioners, the families on welfare, and the people on low wages are now poor because our society has not been justly run, because the redistribution of wealth and