

Anti-Inflation Act

I suggest that two elements are essential if this program is to be taken seriously. First, the government must demonstrate leadership. It must try to unite people, including political parties, on this question. The Prime Minister must be involved, not on some television circuit arranged by Dick O'Hagan, but here in the House of Commons, bringing his own capacity for leadership into the issue. Second, there has to be a firm demonstration that further action is to follow—that the measure before us is not presented in a vacuum. An assurance must be forthcoming that this program of controls, which some of us suspect were thrown together at the last moment, will be accompanied by other serious measures. We expect the government to show much more determination about cutting down its own expenditures, thus giving the kind of leadership which is so important if a program of control and restraint is to be effective.

Unfortunately, the government has been playing a con game, concealing the real growth in its expenditures and in the role of the administration. Before the last election ministers claimed there had been an increase of only 11 per cent in the growth of government expenditures during the past fiscal year. Then, after election day, they brought in supplementary estimates which boosted that increase to 30 per cent. That is an indication of the attitude with which the government approaches its responsibility in the area of economic leadership. It is the kind of hocus pocus we must steer away from.

What is required if this program is to be effective is early and firm evidence that it is part of a package, that it is not the only hard piece in a set designed by Dick O'Hagan; there has to be an indication that the government is serious about moving on other economic fronts and that it is serious about cutting back some of its expenditures.

There has been too much ad hocery on the part of the government. Ministers have been making gestures toward the important problems of the day, but it is not enough in a time of industrial unrest to say simply that a committee is looking into the situation and that hopefully something will emerge, as the minister did the other day. It is not enough, when confronting the issue of the effect of power groups on the economy, for instance, simply to order an investigation—not because it is a continuing problem but because an embarrassing particular problem has been raised by the aspirations of Power Corporation; the government was looking for a way to avoid it, and that is how we got into the Bryce Commission. As I say, too much use is made of the ad hoc approach. This is very much in the nature of the former minister of finance who is very big on cosmetics but who did not undertake to provide Canada with the leadership it needed in dealing with various economic issues.

All of us who have talked to Canadians during the recess have become aware of the seriousness with which individual Canadians are viewing inflation. Small businessmen are wondering about their capacity to keep their businesses going. The problem is very deep, and the sense of despair about the government's recognition of the problem is very deep.

● (2130)

Somebody asked me the other day: "Do any of you guys in Ottawa realize how serious things are?" I think that question is being posed at one level or another, in one way or another, by people all across the country, because people believe the problem is a serious one, one that requires response.

We on this side have indicated for a long time now that we are prepared to support any serious initiative that is taken, provided that there is a demonstration that the situation is crucial, providing there is a demonstration that, along with the controls and the excessive power which is given to the Minister of Finance, there will be action on other fronts and leadership of some other kind. I repeat what others on this side of the House have said. We are prepared to support in principle the measure that has been introduced so long as we receive demonstrations that the government is serious about this program, so long as we receive the kind of information that we will require in the standing committee and the government is responsive to some of the amendments we will be introducing to limit excessive powers which appear, on the face of the bill, to be granted this government.

Mr. Arnold Peters (Timiskaming): Madam Speaker, I have been very interested in the debate today and in the fact that on occasion the Chair has had to call members to order for not talking about the bill. I think the comments which have been made show how difficult it is to follow this piece of legislation.

The backbenchers in the Conservative party have been defending the idea of controls so long as they are removed after a short period of time. Somebody says after 90 days. We have just heard the backbenchers in the Liberal party make a great about-switch; I get the impression that this bill does not really matter to them at all. The principle is not involved. There has been little discussion of the principle of this bill.

The Conservatives have developed their policy over a period of time, but it is a policy with which I disagree. They know what their policy is and so do I, and I disagree with it. On the other hand the backbenchers in the Liberal party do not know what this is all about. They do not understand it. They are for the bill now because the Minister of Finance (Mr. Macdonald) has had to come up with a program in a very short period of time. So the members on that side are now for the bill. They were against it before, but perhaps they were mistaken. In any event, the climate has now changed, and as we are a long way from an election they say perhaps it is a good idea since the minister says it is just that.

That raises another interesting question. I should like to know why the former minister of finance quit his portfolio. Did he want stronger controls or less controls? Did he learn something in the international arena about the finances of Canada in relation to the finances of other countries that we know nothing about? Or did he just happen to decide to leave the ship? The new Minister of Finance was about to leave the ship as well and go back to greener pastures, but he decided to stay on and put through this piece of legislation. A large number of senior civil servants also left during the last year. Were they in