

*Agricultural Products Act*

I hold strong views with respect to the importance of the British market, and I trust those views will receive sympathetic support in every section of this house. I know they receive that support on the part of those among whom I sit, and I feel confident that they have the same support in every section of the house, including even the government itself.

My purpose this morning will be to show three things: first, that the export market for agricultural products has continued to deteriorate day by day during recent months and even during recent years; second, that this bill, which will terminate in a year, and which does not carry forward a permanent policy, does not touch the edge of that problem; and third, that unless something more substantial is done, agriculture will soon be brought face to face with a major crisis, accompanied by a very serious price recession.

The legislation with which we are now dealing has been before us many times in recent years. Its purpose in wartime was to aid Britain by assuring her of a stated supply of certain agricultural commodities. I have heard no one on the government side state its purposes in peacetime. No one has suggested to me that the purpose of this measure is to aid Britain. With a bill such as this, if that were suggested, it would be laughed out of court. No one has suggested it is for the purpose of aiding Canada. To do that would be to admit that we have substantially lost our great British market, and that this was necessary to save some of it.

This legislation, Mr. Speaker, is not brought in at this time to help Britain. Whether so intended or not, it emphasizes the fact that our markets in Great Britain have been gradually disappearing and are now substantially gone as a permanent factor in dealing with our surplus agricultural products. On its surface, the bill appears very innocent, and I am not suggesting there was any intention of representing it as anything else. But it is not what appears on its surface that matters—it is what is not shown by the bill that is important, namely, that the British market, which has been the main basis of the development of the Canadian economy, particularly its agricultural economy, has in large part disappeared.

Last night the minister told us that on behalf of the government he has entered into three contracts with Britain; one for bacon, one for cheese, and one for eggs. He told us what we of course knew—that this legislation is needed in order to carry out those contracts. It is needed so that the minister can be sure he will get those commodities and have them delivered to Britain in the quantities specified. In order to accomplish all this, he has to ask for dictatorial powers.

[Mr. Bracken.]

We should not forget the history of this legislation, Mr. Speaker. It covers two periods, the period of the war and the period subsequent to the war. As I said a moment ago, the recent history covers only two years, but the earlier history goes back ten years. In its recent history this act has been before us on four different occasions. It was first passed in March, 1947, to expire in December of that year. We heard of it next in December, 1947, when it was extended to March, 1948. The third time it came before us was in March, 1948, at which time it was extended to March, 1949. Under this bill we are now dealing with it a fourth time, to extend it until March, 1950.

The genesis of this legislation, then, goes back ten years. It goes back to the wartime food contracts with Britain. This fact is outlined in the preamble of the act we are asked to extend. That preamble was read in full by my leader last night, so I do not propose to read it again. It indicated that the legislation was first prompted by the grave distress in Britain. It purported to be based on the need for the more efficient prosecution of the war and what the government termed a national emergency. Now, in 1949, we are asked to approve that same act with the same preamble.

With all deference to the government and to the minister, Mr. Speaker, those are not the reasons for the introduction of this bill at this time. The reason is not the relief of Britain. I have not heard it expressed, but one reason must be to ensure the fulfilment of these contracts. But I believe the real reason for this bill is to relieve the government of the criticism that would otherwise ensue for having lost that great market upon which our economy has depended for so many years.

What is the situation today? In my judgment the government has been losing the British market for the last four years, perhaps longer. This government is losing it more rapidly today than ever before. In my judgment our share of that market would have completely disappeared by now except for the fact that the government of Britain feels that if it did not purchase these products it might be denied some of what to it are favourable terms of the present wheat agreement.

What I am saying here this morning will be critical of the government's basic policy, but I trust it will not be a partisan criticism. I want to lay before the house certain evidence to show that the great British market is slipping from our grasp, and slipping rapidly.