

● (1430)

Mr. Lee Clark (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Agriculture): Madam Speaker, I am happy to have the opportunity to participate in private Members' hour and in the consideration of Bill C-289 which is a proposed Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act and concerns the listing of ingredients contained in restaurant food. The Bill would compel every restaurant to make available to the public a list, in English or in French, of all the ingredients in any food it sells.

This is certainly a sensitive issue that has received a great deal of attention from health professionals, food regulators, the media and the public at large. Certainly this attention is well justified. Tragic deaths have resulted from allergic reactions to restaurant food, particularly in so-called fast-food restaurants. According to various news reports, some 25,000 Canadians are at risk every day because of their food allergies, and some 24 people have died in Canada over the past two years alone because of allergic reactions to food eaten in restaurants.

It is heartening to note that the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) is well aware of this problem. I had the pleasure of attending a committee meeting at which he was present and at which this issue was discussed. The Minister is also very concerned about this problem. He has already issued instructions to his Department to determine how much if any of an increase in food sensitivity reactions there has been, whether a perceived increase might be due to the availability of better instrumentation and diagnosis and whether the population as a whole is becoming more sensitive for one reason or another. Certainly the media attention that has focused on this issue in the last year or so could be a factor in that.

In addition, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health and Welfare has held hearings, one of which I was present at, on the feasibility of mandatory labelling for food products sold in restaurants and fast food outlets. The Government is determined to find the best solution to the problem. It is likely that a large proportion of food sensitivity reactions are linked to relatively few foods or food components. On the other hand, almost any food has the potential to trigger a serious allergic reaction in a particular individual who is perhaps more than generally sensitive.

This problem is complex, and it is vital, therefore, to solicit input from all parties concerned. Officials from Health and Welfare Canada and from the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs have consulted with both the Canadian Food and Restaurant Association and the Allergy Information Association. Consensus has been reached that a chart identifying foods served in an establishment and an indication as to whether or not they contain substances for listing on a so-called priority list was perhaps the most suitable mechanism for providing the information required by consumers with food sensitivities.

In this context, I think it is appropriate to quote from a letter from Mr. Douglas Needham, Executive Vice President

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of the Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association. Mr. Needham writes that his association:

—supports the consumer's right to know the ingredients used in restaurant meals, and that his Association continues to work with all concerned groups to identify and implement measures that will decrease the likelihood of more tragic deaths.

I think Mr. Needham and his association should be applauded for that stand.

In fact, according to a recent report by the Canadian Press, the Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association is strongly encouraging a voluntary program among its 6,800 members. Industry spokespeople such as Mr. Needham have said that restaurant menus should warn consumers of ingredients that could lead to allergic reactions before they order meals. The association has suggested a system of warning charts that could be introduced in quick service restaurant chains because these establishments have a highly centralized control over ingredients.

The consistency of the menus in chain restaurants combined with the limited choices that are normally available make the charts a manageable idea. According to the same report by Canadian Press, the association has talked with 24 quick service or fast food restaurant chains, and of those 24, 22 have voluntarily agreed to take part in such a plan. This is good news. It shows that the food industry is well aware of the problem and is more than willing to take some steps to resolve it. It further shows that the idea of an ingredients list, if it can be adequately fine tuned and made manageable and practical, is indeed a good one.

It is quite possible that the best way to protect Canadians with food allergies as they dine out is through the use of an ingredients list. If this is the case, then every effort should be made to adopt the very best listing system possible. In this light, it seems quite probable that Bill C-289, effective as it has been in focusing attention on the problem, can be improved. It is essential that consumers get the information they need to protect themselves in the market-place and to make intelligent choices. This applies as much to allergy sufferers who dine in restaurants as it does to anyone else.

The Government is determined to bring about an effective solution to this issue. If that solution is found to centre upon ingredient disclosure lists, then the House can be assured that the listing requirements will be applied in a manner that is effective, fair and as cost-efficient as possible.

Fast food and quick service restaurants are popular among Canadians for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons is that in large measure, quality control is strict, consumers know what they are getting with a great deal of certainty when they buy a product and the prices are reasonable and generally affordable. We want to make sure that it stays this way.

We must adopt a system that affords the best possible protection to the Canadian consumer and at the same time allows greater freedom and safety for those who suffer from food allergies. Thank you, Madam Speaker, for permitting me