

*Seaway and Canal Tolls*

represent who are, of course, all the electors in Canada. We should like to consider this matter before the seaway authority makes a recommendation to the federal cabinet and it passes an order in council authorizing this increase in the tolls.

It is true that this matter is now being considered at a hearing taking place today in the nation's capital. I suppose it could be argued that neither this house nor the government should concern themselves with this matter before the completion of the hearings and before recommendations are made to the government. It has happened before that recommendations to the government were taken under advisement by the cabinet and nothing more was heard of them until a decision was taken and an order in council passed. I therefore hope that the government will take serious cognizance of the views expressed here today because of the widespread impact which such a measure might have on the whole economy and the whole price structure in Canada if in fact the tolls on the seaway are increased by 10 per cent.

As was pointed out by the hon. member for Kindersley (Mr. Cantelon) when he opened the debate, a great deal of discussion took place before the seaway became operative with regard to whether it should be a toll free system. It is interesting to look back on some of those discussions. For example, we find that in 1957 the hon. member for Northumberland (Mr. Hees), a former minister of transport, is reported to have made it clear that the Progressive Conservative government "believes the imposition of tolls on the St. Lawrence seaway is mandatory." That may have been the opinion of the government of the day but I suggest to you, Mr. Speaker, that a large number of organizations and individuals in Canada held the opinion that there should be no tolls on the St. Lawrence seaway.

I think this matter is urgent, as do most people who are acquainted with the cost-price squeeze affecting the western farmers. This is not the time to allow any changes which will further aggravate the cost-price squeeze. The Dominion Bureau of Statistics and several farm organizations have gathered information and compiled statistics to the effect that the cost of production in the field of agriculture in western Canada is going up much more rapidly than the returns to the farmers. To allow at this time a further decline in receipts from wheat in the amount

of a cent and a quarter a bushel will certainly aggravate the cost-price squeeze.

Not very long ago we had a debate in the house regarding the effect which this might have on the farmer. I will not go over those statistics at present. However, I submit that it is not only the farmer who will suffer as a result of an increase in the tolls on the seaway. I am sure that every member in this house—and this has been mentioned almost every day—is aware of the concern of Canadian consumers respecting the rising cost of living. I know that my mail has contained far more letters during these past few weeks expressing concern about this matter than at any time since I became a member of this house.

The statistics provided to us by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics show an increase in the cost of living almost every month. In fact, it has gone up several percentage points in the past few months and certainly in the past year. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, if parliament and the government can do anything to slow down the increase in the cost of living, they certainly have an obligation to do so. I suggest that to allow an increase in the tolls on the St. Lawrence seaway will ultimately result in an increase in the tariffs charged for moving goods from the lakehead to Montreal and to all the places in between, which in turn will immediately result in a rise in the cost of living.

• (3:40 p.m.)

This is a matter of urgent public importance. It is one that concerns a very great number of the Canadian people, quite apart from the matter of costs in the agricultural sector. I suggest that if there is an increase in the tolls charged on cargoes carried by ships up and down the seaway, there will be a corresponding increase in the rates charged by competitive modes of transport. The result will be an immediate increase in the retail prices of the goods involved. The seaway, Mr. Speaker, is such an important link in our transportation system that I suggest these increases will cover almost all goods in the consumer market to a greater or lesser degree depending on what percentage the cost of transportation represents in the price of these goods.

This could set off another round of the inflationary spiral. I urge the government to consider this matter seriously, especially in view of their claim that they are concerned about the rising cost of living. In the budget