

Oral Questions

My caucus met with farm and political leaders today who described the state of agriculture in Canada with phrases like "decay of a nation" and "watching a culture die".

The hard facts are that bankruptcies in farm and related industries were up 77 per cent in October over September, but in Saskatchewan they are up 250 per cent. Some farmers will not last until Christmas. Yet this government insists on waiting months to distribute all its emergency aid cash to farmers.

In the name of mercy, why not now?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, in the name of accuracy, money is being distributed now. We have about 10 per cent of the total amount of NISA cheques in the mail. We have application forms that are going to be in the mail by the end of this week for the \$400 million of special assistance. There is GRIP money that is starting to flow.

Farmers have cash advances available to them. The government, through the supporting of credit to the Soviet Union, to name one, is shipping and moving grain at a record clip.

We do know, and I say this as a farmer, that we very much appreciated the farmers being here this week. I had a chance to meet with them this morning and spent an hour with them at our caucus. We met with them yesterday, with the Deputy Prime Minister. Our Prime Minister met with the premier of Saskatchewan. They have made their case with a lot of class and I think in the process have impressed upon people very much the desperateness of their situation. I think that does them a lot of credit, especially when they are suffering such very low prices.

Having said that, the money that we have put on the table is in the process of being distributed. I think the hon. member should realize that there is going to be something like \$2.8 billion net in the farmers' hands from government programs by the end of June next year. That is a lot of money.

Mr. John Harvard (Winnipeg St. James): Mr. Speaker, my supplementary question is again for the Prime Minister who indicated yesterday that he would be meeting with the finance minister to talk about possibly some new money for farmers. But if he takes as long to make up his mind as he did the last time, hundreds of farmers could lose their farms.

I ask the Prime Minister: Can he give Canadian farmers assurances that any new announcement will be made quickly before hundreds more farmers go under?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, with respect, the programs that are in place are being put in place as a result of consultations with farm groups and with the provinces. I would suggest that the money that is going out is going out at a pretty good clip based on the process that we have to use.

With some of the money that we put out in the past, in fact the member has been up on his feet in the past couple of years yelling because some of the money did not go until later on toward spring seeding. Some of this money is in the process of going out now. I just told him that application forms are going to be in the mail this week for the new money that is there. If in fact farmers want to send back their applications as quick as they get them, some of that money will be available before Christmas.

• (1430)

Mr. Lorne Nystrom (Yorkton—Melville): Mr. Speaker, I have a very serious question for the Prime Minister of Canada.

Most of us in this House had an opportunity in the last couple of days to meet with farmers from across the prairies. We know the frustration, the despair, the human tragedy that those farmers talked about. We have a crisis now that is worse than any time in this country since the 1930s in terms of bankruptcy, incomes that are well below the poverty level, all kinds of social problems, economic problems, school depopulation, rural depopulation.

In light of that, can the Prime Minister tell the farmers of this country, particularly the prairies, whether or not he is willing now to consider their request for an extra emergency amount of money worth \$500 million and have that money sent out soon to the farmers across the prairies.

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker, I had a very good meeting yesterday with the premier of Saskatchewan precisely on this point. I think that the premier acknowledged that the amounts under GRIP and NISA and the special deficiency payment of \$800 million was probably unprecedented by the Government of Canada in favour of Canadian farmers.