

agricultural industry is a nation where the cost of food is so high that it bears no relation to the cost of other consumer goods. As the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) has reminded us, in Canada we have an enviable record of maintaining the lowest food prices in the world. But this record cannot and shall not be maintained by the agricultural community itself.

Most growers and others involved in the production, processing and marketing of Niagara fruits believe in the basic resolve that the industry must be maintained. Accordingly, the regional municipality of Niagara in which the industry is centred has brought forward a draft official plan which puts a heavy emphasis on the retention of Niagara's fruit lands for just that purpose. More recently, and no doubt more importantly, the province of Ontario has passed legislation to provide for planning and development in the Niagara escarpment area which complements the official plan by placing a heavy agricultural purposes. The province has taken this step in recognition of the uniqueness of that fruit industry and the importance of giving it protection against the encroaching onslaught of residential, commercial and industrial development in the Niagara peninsula.

● (1550)

However, Mr. Speaker, designating lands for agriculture is only half of the measure that must be taken. It must be complemented by an attempt on the part of the federal government to make the fruit industry economically viable by the imposition of tariffs and/or flexible import quotas on fresh and processed tender fruits coming into Canada from jurisdictions such as Australia, South Africa and the United States that do not face the cost-price squeeze experienced by the Canadian producer, of which I spoke a moment ago.

The federal government has a responsibility to act. It has been responsible for setting minimum wage rates in certain endeavours which has the effect of setting a precedent in Canada, in so far as minimum wage rates are concerned, which growers with a minimum profit margin find difficult to meet. Growers must pay Canada Pension Plan premiums. The federal government is responsible for tariff and other forms of taxation on items that the grower includes in his cost of production. It has imposed unemployment insurance, the contribution of premiums by growers, and has set benefits at a level that convince many people who might otherwise work in the industry that it is more beneficial to accept the benefits of unemployment insurance, or other forms of social assistance to which the federal government contributes, rather than work in the industry.

In one of his now famous "honey and all is well" speeches to the agricultural community, the hon. Minister of Agriculture stated in Niagara-on-the-Lake on June 15 last, when discussing the proposed zoning and preserving of lands for agricultural purposes:

I do not think they—

Referring to farmers.

—and they alone, should bear the full cost of expropriation or restricted use which is a decision made by society for the good of society as a whole.

Customs Tariff (No. 2)

He is quite correct. But, as usual, he never explains how the government will assist the agricultural community to avoid bearing the full cost of such restrictions. I suggest there are a variety of ways the government can assist the fruit and vegetable grower, but the first and foremost must be to provide a domestic market for his produce at reasonable prices without the interference or unfair competition from offshore products that in many cases are shipped into Canada certainly below the wholesale price of the exporting nation and sometimes even below that country's cost of production.

Our present anti-dumping legislation really is a farce and it is useless to the Canadian fruit and vegetable industry. It takes four or more months to establish whether there has been dumping contrary to the rules and, further, to ascertain whether damage has been done prejudicial to our production. Nor are the assurances of the Minister of Finance, that tariffs will be reinstated if substantial damage to our particular industry can be proven, good enough. Even the threats of imports can do damage to our industry, and the process of proving damage simply takes too long. I suggest, Mr. Speaker, that the principle is wrong that Canadians producing a Canadian product for Canadian consumption should have to prove damage by foreign competition.

Mr. Speaker, until now I have attempted to explain the importance of the Niagara fruit industry and the most important problem facing that industry. That brings me to Monday evening, February 19 last, when the hon. Minister of Finance announced in his budget address proposed cuts of certain tariffs on the importation of out of season fruits and vegetables. This news has been received by the Niagara fruit industry with such shock, anger, dismay and utter frustration that it is still reeling and has yet to recover. Perhaps the brunt or the worst of this unilateral reduction of tariffs on fruit and vegetables has been avoided this year only by the fact that the volume of production is down substantially for the current fruit season.

I believe that the hon. Minister of Agriculture is an intelligent man, but he is either so inept in understanding the fruit and vegetable industries in this country that he should not be the Minister of Agriculture or, in the alternative, he was ignored when the budget proposals were being prepared by the hon. Minister of Finance. I strongly suspect it was the latter. Does the government not realize that we must maintain this industry in order to provide competition for the offshore products which are bound to enter Canada? If we have nothing with which to compete, sooner or later our own industry will wither and we shall be entirely dependent upon offshore products, at whatever the cost to the Canadian consumer.

I read with great interest the speech of the Minister of Agriculture to the annual meeting of the Canadian Horticultural Council when that body last met in Ottawa. I congratulate the minister, who is not in his seat, on the first half of his speech, which was well written. There are many things in it with which I agree. However, as I read the second half I began to wonder who was really pulling the strings. Surely the minister does not believe that the tariff reductions will actually be reflected in the consumer price of imported canned peaches, pears and other tender fruits.