

Food and Drugs Act

Bill C-289, although incomplete and imperfect, allows us to take a step forward by offering a possible solution. I am sure that officials at Health and Welfare Canada and Consumer and Corporate Affairs will carefully study it in detail, while continuing to protect the health and safety of Canadian consumers. I am also sure, Madam Speaker, that they will continue to discover ways to protect persons suffering from food allergies.

Mr. Fernand Jourdenais (La Prairie): Madam Speaker, the Hon. Member for Hamilton-East (Ms. Copps) has tabled Bill C-289, an Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act. This Bill would compel restaurants to make available for public consultation a list in English and in French, of all the ingredients in any foods sold by them. This Bill, madam Speaker, would also compel caterers to affix on the packaging of any packaged food they sell, in French and in English, a list of all the ingredients they use.

The purpose of Bill C-289 is to protect consumers who may have allergic reactions to various foods or to the ingredients in such food. The Bill, madam Speaker, proposes to solve this problem by forcing restaurants to provide a list of the ingredients they use.

Madam Speaker, the problem is the same for consumers who buy food in food stores. Consumers may also in that case have allergic reactions and that must be taken into consideration. In so far as food purchased in food stores is concerned, the problem is partially resolved by the listing of ingredients as required by food and drug regulations.

However, the requirement to list ingredients on pre-packaged foods was not conceived with allergic persons in mind, but to give consumers a list, in decreasing order, of the various substances contained in the foods they purchase.

Madam Speaker, it is the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs that has the responsibility of managing the labelling, packaging, and marketing of foods, pursuant to the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act and regulations and the Food and Drugs Act. The Health Protection Branch of the Department of Health and Welfare advises the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs on the labelling and marketing of products that have any bearing on health.

Madam Speaker, various information is required on the labels of pre-packaged foods, such as the following.

- 1) The common name of the food;
- 2) The net quantity of the contents;
- 3) The name and address of the person or company that produced the food;
- 4) The list of ingredients;
- 5) The shelf life of the food and preservation instructions.

All this information must be provided, in French and in English. The only exceptions are the name and address of the manufacturer which may be printed in either of the official languages of this country. And I refer you to Bill C-72.

Madam Speaker, as we are now debating Bill C-289, it is important to mention that it is the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs that was entrusted with the responsibility for these labelling requirements.

That is understandable as these measures were adopted to protect the consumer. The consumer must know what he is buying. He must be aware of the quality of the product and be sure it is not being sold on the basis of misleading advertising.

Madam Speaker, this is a very important point, and I want to make it clear that our present labelling requirements which have been in effect since the early seventies and are quite strict and effective, are above all aimed at protecting the consumer. However, while Bill C-289 is also aimed at protecting the consumer's health, its purpose is to protect the consumer against the possibility of allergic reactions to allergens in food consumed in restaurants. As I said before, neither the Food and Drugs Act nor the regulations on labelling were designed to identify allergens.

However, Madam Speaker, the public is demanding specific information on ingredients and components of the food offered in restaurants and by suppliers.

Madam Speaker, Canadians are eating more and more meals outside the home. Every year, the percentage of our income spent on restaurant meals and on food purchased outside the home is increasing considerably, and the number and popularity of fast food restaurants is increasing as well.

Furthermore, Madam Speaker, a number of Canadians suffering from allergies is important. Canadians are concerned about their health and, according to public opinion polls, they are aware of allergy problems. The use of additives, preservatives and colouring agents is often challenged, especially if they contain allergens. That is why food processors often indicate on their labels the fact that their products do not contain such substances.

There are also certain whole foods that may cause allergies without containing additives or preservatives. We know that some people are allergic to nuts, fish, the gluten found in corn and wheat and to dairy products.

In the last few decades, Madam Speaker, food technology has made tremendous progress. Many foods and food products are subject to complex processes or combine a large number of ingredients. All this increases the complexity of our food and also increases our chances of having an allergy.

For all these reasons, Madam Speaker, Canadians who are at risk should be offered a margin of safety when they go out to a restaurant, especially since this is becoming an increasingly common social custom.

In concluding, I would say that Bill C-289 is a step forward. However, we must not forget that identifying ingredients is only one of the solutions to the problem we are facing today. This legislation will certainly be a first step, but there are other questions that remain to be answered.