

*Food Prices*

fully listened to several speeches. At one time, I became aware that hon. members were saying that Progressive Conservatives did not make any contribution, that Liberals did not have any new ideas, that social Credit did not have any serious propositions to make and that the NDP was satisfied with saving the government's life.

Mr. Speaker, what is important is not to discuss the particular subject under consideration, namely the report of the special committee but, perhaps, to wonder why we had to set up this committee, why the government or hon. members were lead to recognize the importance of the committee and to what extent the committee will suggest anything concrete and worthwhile for the consumers. I know that Canadian consumers are very worried and expect this committee, a creation of Parliament, to suggest corrections. The committee made the following recommendation:

That the government give consideration to the advisability of introducing the necessary legislation to establish an independent Food Prices Review Board equipped with such powers as are necessary to review prices, and that it report to the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs.

The hon. member who had the floor before me declared that we were not to expect this committee to have the powers to bring back the prices of past years. Then it seems that there are doubts about the efficiency of the committee, that one wonders if the consumer will finally benefit from decent food prices. Surely, all essential products could be affected.

As I said a while ago, why is such a committee necessary today? I do not think that I am wrong when I say that almost everybody expected the difficulties now facing us. And this does date back to yesterday; I think that even the government realized the danger when it referred to the fight which it has led against inflation for five years. There was therefore a danger. It was impossible to solve the problem due to a lack of proper measures, but this brings up today to recognize that as far as food is concerned as well as in all other fields, appreciable increases occurred as a result of hundreds of factors. I will be brief but will surely not be so bold as to say that this government is responsible for that problem. Surely, some circumstances and reasons explain why prices have increased. On the one hand, it will be said that this is because of the unions and on the other hand, that this government did not apply adequate measures.

We must still recognize that we are in an extremely difficult situation, and this is why the committee is prepared to make recommendations to the responsible minister. We recognize also that we are all in the same mess because of a host of factors, and later on, of course, we could blame Tom, Dick or Harry.

What matters for the consumer is to find a solution. I remember that, the other night, the hon. member for Louis-Hébert (Mrs. Morin) said that the committee would have to check and analyze, for instance, the often misleading publicity aimed at the consumer. I think that this is one of the excellent recommendations that the committee has retained. And I think that in such a field much need to be done. Moreover, it is what were doing those who some time ago were in favour of the inquiry on advertising which often prompts the consumer to spend much more than necessary.

[Mr. La Salle.]

On the other hand, I think that people expect results from that committee, and it is important to ask ourselves what exactly will be its powers and if it will limit itself, for instance, to making recommendations to the minister?

Will they be as decisive as they were about the Bell Canada rate increases? Will the committee that studies this question even report on why prices have gone up? I suspect that the consumer will be justly disappointed.

I therefore think it is important for the committee to have the power to look into the reasons behind the price increases, but if someone at a higher level decides to say no to that, whether because the reasons are inadequate or because of an increase that is excessive for the consumer, that will be that, and things will not go any further.

A suggestion by the Progressive Conservative party, namely a freeze on food prices, and a general price freeze, was rejected out of hand. This suggestion, which deserves some attention, might have been submitted to the government—I know that the government looked into it in any case—and they could have imposed a price freeze two years ago.

With regard to the 90 cent hind quarter of beef, large companies selling meat would certainly be glad to see prices frozen at that level. I consider that it would be doing the consumer a disservice to freeze prices now, without undertaking to bring them down to a reasonable level.

We have no right to reject this suggestion without giving it serious thought. We know very well that a 90-day price freeze might be acceptable without there necessarily being a wage freeze, but we also know that a long term price freeze would bring about a wage freeze.

There are all kinds of difficulties involved, but how can the government reject such proposals without examining them thoroughly, when it has found no way of stopping abrupt price increases that are putting the consumer in real difficulties? And the proof of this is that the government is relying on that commission to improve the prevailing situation.

I also listened to a proposal made by the hon. members belonging to the Social Credit Party of Canada, involving compensated discounts. At first sight, that concept might fascinate the consumer because of the prospect of reimbursement to them of 25 per cent of retail prices. But nothing was said of the way in which such a compensated discount can be granted. We know quite well that if the government implemented such a policy manufacturers and dealers would naturally take the biggest bite into the cake.

The retailer would therefore be far from receiving the 25 per cent discount proposed by Social Credit. I therefore conclude that consideration of a measure involving so many problems is premature as far as benefiting the consumer is concerned.

In view of the government's position, we must fall back on the committee and rely on it to a great extent because it will be able to scrutinize prices and make recommendations.

In the circumstances, the public is clearly expecting action. It recently reacted by boycotting prices, refusing to buy some types of meat. This action did have some influ-