

Inquiries of the Ministry

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Diefenbaker: Mr. Speaker, may I be allowed to thank the Prime Minister for those words, characteristic of the House of Commons, in that things that separate us are forgotten when illness strikes any of our members.

Mr. W. H. A. Thomas (Middlesex West): May I ask the Associate Minister of National Defence how soon he expects the report of the special committee studying the militia to be submitted?

Mr. Cardin: It is expected that the Suttie commission will report at the end of May or the beginning of June.

AGRICULTURE

TOBACCO—GOVERNMENT ACTION RESPECTING PRICES OFFERED

On the orders of the day:

Mr. T. C. Douglas (Burnaby-Coquitlam): Mr. Speaker, may I direct a question to the Prime Minister or the Minister of Agriculture. There is a report in this morning's *Globe and Mail* headed "Bloodshed Is Feared Over Tobacco Price". The article states:

Ontario's three tobacco auction exchanges will remain closed indefinitely "to prevent possible violence and bloodshed"—

It says the complaint is that the tobacco farmers are being offered by the buyers 5 cents and 10 cents a pound for 50 cents a pound tobacco. The report says a five man delegation is coming to Ottawa today to meet the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture. I should like to ask if this delegation is going to be met, and what action the government proposes to take to deal with this very serious situation.

Hon. Harry W. Hays (Minister of Agriculture): Mr. Speaker, I will be meeting a delegation headed by Mr. Demeyere immediately after orders of the day, along with a group of five members of his board, and they will also meet the Prime Minister. At that time we hope to help solve this very serious problem.

For the information of the house, it seems to me that hon. members would probably be interested to learn that to date through the tobacco auction some 117,191,000 pounds of tobacco have been sold, and the average price to date is 51.14 cents per pound. On the same date a year ago they had disposed of 73,500,000 pounds at about the same average price, 50.13 cents.

This year the tobacco growers have grown somewhat less acreage of tobacco but on their

[Mr. Pearson.]

99,000 acres, they have produced about 181 million pounds. There are 4,400 growers of tobacco, and there are some 85 grades involved. It is quite a complicated problem, and I hope we will be able to help Mr. Demeyere and his group solve this serious situation.

Mr. Douglas: A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker. May I ask the minister if it is correct that there are a million pounds in the auctions now which will have to be taken home by the farmers? May I ask him if the price which is being offered according to this report is actually as low as 3 cents a pound? May I also ask the minister what help he proposes to offer to this delegation. He mentioned the fact that he had some help in mind, and I think the house is entitled to know what measures he proposes to deal with this matter.

Mr. Hays: Mr. Speaker, in answer to the question there have been some 5 million pounds taken home from the tobacco auctions. Under the procedure according to which the auction is held, the buyer has a right to refuse an offer that is made at the auction. If he does this then he has to take the tobacco home. He has three opportunities to sell the tobacco again at the auction. I could not at this time advise what action might be taken before we have an opportunity of discussing the problem with Mr. Demeyere. It is quite a long and complicated procedure under which tobacco is sold, but I should be glad to explain it if that is the wish of the house.

Mr. Douglas: May I ask a supplementary question. The minister mentioned that help would be given. Am I to take it from his remarks now that he does not know what kind of help will be given, but he merely hopes that some help will be forthcoming?

Mr. Hays: I would not want to express an opinion on what we might do until we can sit down and discuss all the ramifications of this matter.

Mr. W. B. Nesbitt (Oxford): Mr. Speaker, I should like to direct a question to the Minister of Agriculture concerning the present situation in the tobacco industry. Will the minister consider, as an emergency measure, recommending to his cabinet colleagues that a suitable floor price be put under this flue-cured tobacco?

Mr. Hays: Of course there is a 47 cent support price under tobacco at the moment. As I said to the hon. member for Burnaby-Coquitlam, I cannot make any suggestions until after we have discussed the problem.