

Food Prices

During the study in committee, there was talk about control of production, wages and consumer prices. It is very difficult to talk about control of production when we see what has taken place, for instance, concerning feed grains. We saw that western farmers were being paid for not producing any wheat. And I do not blame them because, to a certain extent in all fields, what we are looking for is maximum profits.

Everything will be sacrificed in order to maintain the price of wheat. Over the past years we saw western farmers let thousands of bushels of wheat rot on the field for the only reason that if this wheat was put on the market, this would lower the price. It is useless to say that we want to fight the increase in consumer prices if the primary producers start by saying: We must first keep a maximum price for our products, even if we must destroy half of them. Worse still, when they thought that we would have too many products, they paid farmers not to produce.

Look at what is happening in the province of Quebec. The prices of chicken and butter are going up, but farmers have been paid to destroy their production. Farmers were being paid a 90 cents subsidy for each laying hen that they slaughtered, because there were too many eggs.

Five hundred thousand laying hens were slaughtered on this basis, and now there is a shortage of eggs and prices are shooting up. We do away with the producer, and then we grumble that wholesale and retail prices are going up. We will have to be a little more logical than that, Mr. Speaker!

I was saying just now how interested I was in the evidence brought before the committee; I was taken a back by all those stupidities I heard and I wondered whether a group of 22 or 24 members of Parliament might not try to take a more extensive look at the subject, instead of concerning themselves exclusively with the profits of the dealer who is there for the customer's sake.

Also, we are today witnessing the warning of the large corporations. Chain stores, large producers and meat packers are drawing up their lines of battle. The government is all for it, even among farmers. Rather than work towards a pitched battle, it should help farmers, and family farms, by making up for the lack of funds. That would prevent the dereliction of 40 per cent of family farms, as I have seen it happen in my constituency. The same thing has happened in the West, to make way for large agricultural industries. Prices will not be decided by demand, but by the producer. You either pay up or you close down.

Mr. Speaker, this is no way to help the population. As long as we fail to examine the source of this problem, we will not do more than we did in committee: review small aspects of the problem one by one in an effort to blame the businessman, the packer or the consumer's whim. One says: the customer is too hard to please nowadays. Basically, that is true, but that is not all. The customer used to buy sugar in one hundred pound bags and it cost then a lot less than buying it in six or ten ounce packages, or in fine, extra fine or extra coarse texture. It is evident that all this is reflected in higher consumer prices but if the client or consumer cannot benefit from modern technology, I think there is no need whatsoever to insist on improved techniques, automation and electronics.

[Mr. Gauthier (Roberval).]

We recognize the existence of that evolution, we also recognize that everything costs a little more, but I believe that there is something to be done, as I said earlier, at the level of the large associations which control production, in the same way as there are controls at the monetary level. Everything is imposed upon us and, at the end, we say: It is expensive. Prices are spiralling because the government has not taken the necessary steps to check that. Far from it, the government often promotes those price increases and we can see it interfere outside the field of consumption.

Let us take the control of Hydro Quebec and Bell Canada. But the oldest members are saying: Go ahead, approve the increase, we are for it. In fact, if we truly want to protect the consumer, all these organizations will have to be closely watched. They will have to be controlled by a standing committee of the House which at all times will be empowered to summon the officials of big companies and trusts and demand from them the reasons for such increases whether at the marketing or production level.

Instead of trying to stabilize prices through demand, this committee should determine for example a margin of profit for transportation, packing and marketing. I think this could be used as a basis which, without correcting everything else, could at least give some results. Instead of relying solely on competition, we could use a benefit basis.

At the committee, certain members have suggested absolute control over consumer prices. As the hon. members have already stated, we have had enough controls during the war and no control should be imposed on the Canadian population during peace time. I think Parliament, with a devoted committee which would work throughout the year, can impose its will on those who must supply satisfactory services to the citizens and live from their industry and trade. But at the same time, I think it is possible to impose conditions which, while ensuring adequate services, would allow them to live with largely sufficient incomes. I realize, Mr. Speaker, that my allotted time is exhausted.

● (2030)

[English]

Mr. Allan Lawrence (Northumberland-Durham): Mr. Speaker, we in the Conservative party believe that this country is in the grip of a cost and inflation crisis that can only be termed a national emergency and cries out for national leadership and strong governmental initiative. Old age pensioners and those on fixed incomes in both urban and rural communities in all parts of Canada are especially hard hit, not just by food prices but by the escalating cost of all essentials, namely, shelter, transportation, health and personal care, fuel—

Mr. Reid: Energy costs.

Mr. Baldwin: High government costs.

Mr. Lawrence: —and especially the high cost of government.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!