

• (1720)

Therefore, in conclusion, I would like to say that there is another option to the way that we have been going in this country, to the regime of free trade and letting the big corporations look after our economic future. This is the community based economic option. The potential of this sector is a sleeping giant. We have seen its potential, but this potential is still untapped.

Therefore I would like to call on the government to exhibit the imagination and political will to realize this potential. Not only would individuals and communities benefit, but we as a country would be very much stronger.

Mr. Lee Clark (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of the Environment): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to say a few words on what is not only an important issue but an important movement in the sense that co-ops have been a very integral part of Canada for many decades, and that is particularly true, as the hon. member has just indicated, for rural Canada which in a very real sense each of us represents.

I would like, as a member from western Canada, from the province of Manitoba, representing Brandon—Souris, just to say one or two words by way of introduction with respect to the role of co-ops in the history of western Canada as I have perceived them to be, and then to discuss in greater detail the specific point which is before us this evening.

I think it is probably true that the history of the co-operative movement has not yet been written in any definitive sense. I believe when it is written, or when it is more generally appreciated than is the case now, that there will be a greater awareness of the fact that the co-operative movement for rural Canada has in many cases filled a void which had been there for some time and might have continued to exist into the distant future, had it not been for the co-operative movement and the response of those who lived within the areas.

One of the advantages of course which the co-operative movement had was the fact that it enabled people to a very large degree to look to themselves for solutions to their own problems, whatever the nature of the problems may have been. That is true in terms of the origin of

Private Members' Business

the wheat pools in western Canada, in what we now know as Saskatchewan, then part of the territories, or whether it is in the more recent development of child care co-operatives, day care centres, that are very much a part of most of our urban communities.

One of the great difficulties in rural Canada in the past—and certainly it continues to be now—is the component of size. Very often the private sector is not as interested in meeting what it perceives to be the limited market perspectives of the area. Unfortunately, as a result of that, the alternatives to those who live within the area, the resources available to those who live within the area, were not as great as they would have been.

When I go back and think about the history of the co-operative movement with respect to the marketing of grain, I recall the fact with some clarity that western Canadian grain farmers were faced not with the fact that there were no services made available to meet their needs, but with the fact that very often they were indeed a monopoly. As we know very well, it is the essence of the private sector that it should depend upon the competitive factor to protect the interests of the consumers. Where that is not the case, then very often the consumer is at a disadvantage.

What happened in western Canada in many of our smaller communities is that people began to rally together either to provide a service that was not present at all or to act as a competitive factor with services which already existed and often were operated in a monopolistic fashion.

Thus was born the wheat pools, which today of course is a major agribusiness throughout western Canada, a huge business, perhaps one of the largest that we have, although I do not have the statistics before me.

Another advantage of course of the co-operative movement was that it permitted people to make decisions or have decisions made within their own community, and not to depend upon the headquarters of a business whether it be in Winnipeg, Regina, Toronto or wherever it may be. Very often decisions made by the co-operative movement then, and to a significant degree now, were made by local people in response to local conditions.