

Canagrex Act

in order to take the limelight away from the shortcomings of the government in the budget and the interest rate policy, which has done such tremendous damage to the agricultural community. Let us try to make this a good bill. When doing that, let us protect the consumer, because the consumer is very important.

Hon. Jake Epp (Provencher): Mr. Speaker, I want to make some comments regarding the bill to form a Crown corporation known as Canagrex. The minister will recall a speech I made earlier on the Farm Credit Corporation. I made the statement at that time that one of the components of agriculture that has to be stressed and modernized is the question of selling.

I believe I made the statement at that time that I wanted to see some hard-nose selling. To put it another way, that is also what I am going to say in part today about the Canagrex bill. We need hard-nosed selling, not only in the domestic market but in the export market, which I understand Canagrex will deal with.

I will not be lengthy. I want to cover some of the reasons the minister gave in the cabinet documents as to why he wanted Canagrex established. I think the minister was being straightforward in what he said. The up-front reason was that he wanted to create a Crown corporation in order that it could be a trading corporation, and an export corporation for the sale and export of food.

He said that Canadians were losing markets, and Canagrex could fill a need in that area. I believe that accurately portrays what the minister said he had in mind with regard to the Canagrex Crown corporation.

I have some questions about that. They will have to be discussed in committee. My colleague who just spoke, the hon. member for Etobicoke Centre (Mr. Wilson), put forward some of the problems Canagrex could face in terms of organizational make-up. When one looks at the reasons the minister used to sell the Canagrex idea to his skeptical cabinet colleagues, it is important to understand what arguments the minister was using to try to convince his colleagues as to the establishment of Canagrex.

In their speeches, my colleagues, the hon. member for Vegreville (Mr. Mazankowski) and the hon. member for Wetaskiwin (Mr. Schellenberger) mentioned that if one takes out the grain component of our exports, the food picture is not as bright as one might be led to believe when looking at the figures. I was looking at the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) and every time that was mentioned he appeared to chuckle. He remarked, "Look, fellows, that is not fair, putting it that way."

● (1530)

Let us use the minister's own arguments. What he is supposed to have said in cabinet is that in the late 1970s, for instance, food exports fell to less than 10 per cent of total Canadian exports, even though the 1979 food trade surplus of \$1.4 billion was a record. If one takes that further, one finds,

by the minister's own figures, that if grain sales were taken out—and I am not for one minute saying that grain sales should not be considered—by Agriculture Canada calculations, Canada's deficit in other food trades is in fact rising. It is rising from an average of \$549 million between 1970 and 1972 to a deficit of \$1.889 billion in 1979.

Mr. Mazankowski: What a sad indictment.

Mr. Epp: That was for the general period of time that this minister was the Minister of Agriculture.

What we are seeing, and I think this is the minister's own admission, is that our export record could be much better than it is. I think we agree on that.

Although this matter is not before us today, when a member gets up in the House and states that there are changes needed in the Canadian Wheat Board, there is an immediate knee-jerk reaction from some parts of the House. The question is asked, "Why is that member saying this? Does he want to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board?" That is not the point. Many farmers are saying that they want to preserve the Canadian Wheat Board but they want it to become a better selling agency and they want to have more influence on its decisions. This reaction by the government is happening time after time, and I think it will happen with Canagrex as well. If we are not careful, it will become a corporation which is an entity unto itself and a corporation in which farmers will have very little input.

For example, I noted that the Canadian Federation of Agriculture endorses the concept of Canagrex as a general principle. However, when you read their statement, you find that while they do support it, they are deeply concerned about the amount of influence the producer will have in its operations.

Mr. Mazankowski: The minister agrees with that.

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): He is nodding his head.

Mr. Epp: I think he would agree with the position I have stated. Therefore, the one point was that we want a Canagrex corporation for exports. Second, we know that the minister had to admit to his cabinet colleagues that our food exports were falling behind. I think the minister would admit, as would those of us who come from rural communities, that we can improve our own production to give Canadian consumers a wide variety of foodstuffs which can be produced in Canada.

One example is the greenhouse trade. Those of us who have travelled through Europe would have noticed that in almost every European country greenhouses could be seen for miles. The hon. member for Western Arctic (Mr. Nickerson) would agree that at one time we had agricultural products in the Arctic. One does not have to travel far to see some of the products in the Northwest Territories, which at this time can only be grown during the long summer days. There is far more production possible in the Arctic, but what have we done? We have discouraged it. People cannot buy land and therefore will not invest money and labour in land which they can only rent.