

Food Prices

at food prices. We did not want to play politics with the issue, but wanted to see if we could win some support for our proposal. My friends in the Conservative party would not have anything to do with it. They wanted, and I do not question their sincerity, a wide ranging program of freezes and controls. They made that point. Otherwise, they would not go along with anything. The Liberals on the committee reluctantly agreed to the principle of having a prices review board, but wanted any powers of sanction, which we had hoped would be given to the board, to remain in the hands of the government.

On that somewhat unsatisfactory basis, the committee came to a majority decision to recommend the establishment of a board to this parliament. I am happy to say when the first report was debated and approved by the House, among the conclusions approved was that of a prices review board. Shortly thereafter, the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Gray) announced the establishment of a board under the Inquiries Act. As far as that announcement was concerned, we approved it. We believed that a board established under the Inquiries Act, given full powers of investigation, could get under way more quickly than would have likely been the case had the government brought legislation of a similar nature to this House.

Our quarrel was not that the board be set up under the Inquiries Act, but that the board be given significant powers to impose roll-backs of prices where necessary. Nothing in the debate which took place in this House or in committee up until that time gave us the slightest assurance we could look forward to any support from those in the Conservative benches who were still tied solely and obsessively to their proposal for wage and price controls. With those defects and short-comings, the Prices Review Board went into operation. Since that time, I regret to say, the defects have loomed up and become more noticeable.

I want to comment on three or four of these defects. First, the government did not appear to take the role of the board very seriously. According to a statement which the board chairman made to the public as late as August, the board received very little co-operation. In fact, in some respects it was being obstructed by government departments through failure to provide the necessary staff.

In August, the CPI figures were released. I can just hear someone sitting around the cabinet table asking what the Prices Review Board was doing about this. It was not until that time the government woke up to the fact it had a Prices Review Board. The minister was obviously told in no uncertain terms to make sure the board got functioning as quickly as possible. I believe the minister is guilty of complacency and considerable political shortsightedness.

If the Prices Review Board had begun functioning earlier and more favourably, it would have been better for the Canadian consumer and, I assume, the government. However, the board seems to have taken too leisurely a view of its role. Not until publicly criticized in August did the chairman admit having that difficulty. What prevented her from indicating previously she was encountering this difficulty with the government and asking for the help of this House to get the staff required?

Up until the beginning of September, this board had only three meetings per se, two of which took place after

[Mr. Grier.]

the story which broke in the Toronto press about double price labelling in the supermarkets. I suspect that as a result of this rather cautious and leisurely manner of setting it up, the board received very little support from the government. I suspect, encouraged by the government, it has taken too narrow a view of its terms of reference.

● (1610)

It was not necessary for the Prime Minister to announce on August 13 that the board was to be given extra powers to investigate specific price increases. It is perfectly clear from the original terms of reference, and from Mrs. Plumptre's replies to my questions in committee in late July, that she believed she had those powers at that time. I cannot for the life of me see why it was necessary to go all through this rather pointless exercise of giving the board powers that it already had. But the government has consistently backed off the question of sanctions and powers for the board, and in this respect as yet I have had no indication of any different position being taken by my colleagues in the Conservative party.

It is all very well for them to argue that we cannot take a look at food in isolation, that it is all part of the same economy. But you can say that about every item or every matter that comes before this House. The fact is that a committee was set up to look at trends in food prices and it made a recommendation to establish a board to deal with food prices, yet every effort that we have made to force the government to give the board powers has been frustrated by the official opposition.

As recently as two weeks ago, I moved a motion in committee, and I am going to move an amendment later on this afternoon in very similar vein. I should like to read very briefly the substance on the motion: That the food Prices Review Board be reconstituted with full power to require cancellation or rollback of unjustified price increases wherever it finds them, those powers to include imposition of penalties against companies that gouge the consumer. I was sure that that resolution would commend itself to my Conservative friends, but in the end they voted against it. Perhaps they will indicate later in this debate why they took that position, given their concern that this government do something about food prices in Canada.

May I say in passing that I personally have not been terribly impressed by the performance of the chairman of the Food Prices Review Board. She gives me the impression that she talks too much and does too little. Hardly had she accepted the position before she was saying in public that she did not believe in wage and price controls. Regardless of whether I agreed with her, I thought that statement was unnecessarily provocative to the Conservative party, whose co-operation she surely would have required in her work. Then, last weekend the chairman of the board was quoted as saying that the Food Prices Review Board should not be given any powers, which I consider provocative to the New Democratic Party. I am not interested in what Mrs. Plumptre thinks. She is not being paid to run around giving opinions off-the-cuff on matters of this kind. She and her board are being paid to investigate and to make recommendations. This parliament will decide whether the board has any powers, not Mrs. Plumptre.