

*Food Prices Committee*

proposition of the cost of food as it related to poverty in Canada. The two are interrelated.

Going back to 1966, we saw the establishment of a royal commission by the governments of the three prairie provinces to look into food prices. This committee, after exhaustive studies, issued its report in March, 1968. It, too, is a matter of record. About the same time a royal commission was at work in my own province of Newfoundland, again examining the high cost of living and the cost of food. Then, there was another senate committee study, undertaken by the Senate Committee on Finance. It was empowered by the other place to look into the problems of growth, employment and price stability. The report of that committee is now a matter of record and it contains certain precise recommendations in line with its terms of reference.

Of course, we cannot forget for a moment the late and unlamented Prices and Incomes Commission which was established by the present government as a move to hold the line on inflation. We hear little now about the Prices and Incomes Commission and one wonders what happened to the very substantial organization which was put together as a result of the establishment of that commission. I understand that some parts of this organization are still in existence within the government structure. Perhaps the services of those parts may be very usefully called upon to assist this committee when it embarks upon its study.

I refer to the establishment of these committees and commissions to underline my central point, and that is the advisability of another study at this particular time. Here again I refer and defer to my colleague, the hon. member for Northumberland-Durham, although in doing so I have very serious reservations about just exactly what this committee of the House can hope to achieve, especially in light of the statement which was made by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) yesterday at the Federal-Provincial Conference simultaneous to the debate in this House on the setting up of this committee. The minister referred to the fact that he could see no improvement in the general situation so far as increases in food prices in Canada were concerned.

That utterance by the Minister of Finance was well stated today by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Stanfield) and leads us to question the motivation of the government in setting up this committee. If the government hopes to be able to sweep the problem under the carpet or have it pigeon-holed in that place where all similar committee studies, reports and recommendations are placed, then it does not have a full appreciation of the constitution of this parliament.

The House of Commons and the members of this place are not prepared, notwithstanding what the Minister of Finance may have had to say yesterday, to see this matter become the subject of pigeon-holding, or to see the deliberations of this committee swept under the carpet. Neither are the members of this House, if I may say so, prepared to see a situation similar to that which we had in 1966 when the committee of the Senate and the House of Commons was set up. I do not think the members of this House are prepared to support what could very well turn out to be, if the government has its way, one big junket across

the country for the members of this House. I do not think the members of this House are prepared for that, and neither, if I may say so, are the people of the country prepared to accept it.

There is sufficient data and there have been sufficient studies made, and I think one of the principal objectives of this committee should be to compile the principal recommendations of all of the committees to which I have just referred, because even though they may have been set up a few years ago, their findings and recommendations are still very relevant to the present situation we have in Canada. This is a serious problem, one that is far too serious to be swept under the carpet or to be pigeon-holed after a long study by a Commons committee. This is serious because the people of Canada who are suffering the most today from inflation and from an increase in the cost of living are those on lower incomes, on middle incomes and those on fixed incomes; the poor, the working poor and our old age pensioners. We cannot afford to let too much time go by without addressing ourselves to this most serious problem facing our country today.

I happen to come from a province which enjoys the rather dubious distinction of having the highest per capita cost of living in the country and the lowest per capita income in the country. What has happened since this government came into office? About two years ago, we saw the government move to freeze freight rates. The consequence of their failure to do so has been nine increases in freight rates in two years. Every time the railways increase their freight rates, there is a concomitant increase in the cost of living, because an increase in freight rates must be passed on to the consumer who must ultimately pay the cost. Notwithstanding repeated pleas to the government to place an immediate freeze on freight rates, we are on the threshold of having further increases in freight rates. These increases are contributing to the high cost of living we have in the Atlantic provinces and all across Canada, for that matter. They are contributing substantially to the hardships we are imposing upon the poor, those on lower incomes and those on fixed incomes.

While I was encouraged by the reference in the Speech from the Throne to a conference the government proposes to convene with the five regions of the country and their provincial governments, on the whole area of freight rates and the influence freight rates have on the cost of living, I believe the problem is serious enough for the government to take steps now to bring a measure before this House which would place an immediate freeze on freight rates. In that way, the government would be demonstrating its good will and the fact that it is genuinely concerned about this matter. With the constitution of this parliament, who knows how long it will be before such a conference, badly needed as it is, can in fact take place?

Therefore, because of the urgency of the matter, because this is a serious situation, because it has been the subject of parliamentary committee studies before, because it has been the subject of study by royal commissions across the country and by provincial commissions, and in fact because we feel the matter has been studied sufficiently and is an urgent one, and in order to ensure that the committee will conduct itself in light of the urgen-