

Food Prices

cent discount in fact disadvantages the small, independent retailer. In fact, it may bring about pushing that person out of the market place, and meanwhile still be reflected in higher food costs to the general public. Then there are cash discount payments. In other words, if large retailers will pay their bills immediately to the wholesaler, they are given a discount. Yet in practice, even when they get this discount they do not pay the cash on time. There are advertising gains and exchanges so that you have a few people in the market place competing against each other, each of them forced by the other to stay in this very expensive game of grabbing public attention. The price of this may well be passed on to the consumer unnecessarily.

There is also the simple kind of business scheme, bonus trips based on amount of sales, and costs like that which run up food prices. I look forward to investigating that in the committee, and hopefully the independent review board that I am optimistic the government will appoint will also examine the situation.

We have also learned there are world shortages of food commodities. There is especially a very high demand for feed grain, grain and beef and these are all interrelated. People are willing to go out and buy steaks, not only in the United States to which we export a considerable amount but here in Canada, for \$9 or \$10 a time. This simply means that there is both demand and shortage. It takes three or four years to increase your stock of beef. Prices increase and people on limited income and large families in the poverty area simply cannot have that part of their diet which is nutritious.

We have seen Canadian incomes go up in the past five years some 50 per cent. I can remember that there was some discussion in this House at an earlier time about the fact that taxes have gone up in the last five years. So they have. But higher taxes reflect the fact that incomes also have gone up 50 per cent. Instead of people spending about 25 per cent of their income on food, as they did five years ago, they now spend about 19 per cent. Those higher incomes have gone to people along the food chain, as they should justly. All of this is reflected in higher prices.

Transportation costs have gone up for all of us, the producer as well as the wholesaler and the retailer. This is a general trend. But our real crisis is for those people, the poor, the large families, the people on fixed incomes, where increased costs have not gone from 25 per cent to 19 per cent but perhaps from 40 per cent to 45 per cent. This is a very real crisis indeed, and I think the government must face up to it.

I would like to note, before talking about several areas where it has been faced up to, that the party opposite sitting as government in another House, where apparently there is such concern for the poor and those on fixed incomes, has deemed it proper to impose a tax upon one of the largest populations and wealthiest provinces in this country which will hit hardest those people with the least money. This is an energy tax which they claim will eventually not be visited upon poor people. We have a system difficult to understand, and especially the poor have difficulty understanding it. I remember how we were attacked for our tax forms. I say it is the most regressive action I have seen by a provincial government for a number of years. I have followed the course of events as a

journalist, and I do so now sitting as a member of this House.

In contrast to increasing a sales tax which hits hardest at the poorest, imposing an energy tax which is a regressive tax on a basic service, the government has attempted to take strides in certain directions. I think they have taken some very positive strides. There is always more to be done, of course, but we have increased pensions, and raised the exemption level for income tax. Hopefully, we will soon have an announcement from the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde) regarding family allowances and other general plans to help the people in this country who need it most.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, may I talk briefly about the committee's recommendations. The review board is not the "be all and end all," it is not the final answer. But it is a chance for people, especially those who pay cash for food, when they see something they think is wrong to go to somebody and find out whether it is wrong or not. It is going to be part of an education process. It is also, hopefully, going to be a part of finding out who the offenders are and where they are. It is a chance for government to be answerable to people and for a responsible group to say, "yes, that is fair," and, "No, that is not fair."

The members of the NDP have some concern about putting teeth into legislation. The members of the government party felt that to pass a resolution or to put forward recommendations to be brought back to this House to roll back prices simply does not make sense. You simply cannot handle this problem legislatively the way our country is set up.

An hon. Member: Why?

Mr. Fleming: Because of the constitutional breakdown between municipal, provincial and federal responsibility. I say it is just not possible, and I have yet to hear any constitutional expert come forward and say it is possible. If that is the stand of the NDP, I invite them to bring this person forward so he can tell us about it. If we are going to have a review board, and if it is going to be effective, then I am pleased that within the recommendations is the suggestion that there be an opportunity given to the review board, whether through the vehicle of a standing committee or a special committee, at a hearing open to the press, to focus attention on those offenders and exert in this way leverage upon them to fall back into line. With this kind of publicity and confrontation, in the business world you just do not fight it; you back off.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, may I say that the nutrition recommendations—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): Order. Although the Chair might find itself ready to listen to the hon. member, other hon. members wish to participate, and in view of the limited time I do not think I can give the hon. member an extension.

• (2130)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roch La Salle (Joliette): Mr. Speaker, at the end of this debate, I should like to make a few remarks after having heard all kinds of views, mostly divergent. I care-