

Adjournment Debate

some of its findings. Its main point is that Canadians on the whole are badly nourished, regardless of their income level. To take this conclusion at its face value, particularly the latter part, would be a great mistake. There are too many qualifications which must be taken into account. For one thing, the survey does not seem to have made an in-depth study of the very poor, including many of the aged. For another, it has not to date included studies of the native Indian and Inuit peoples. For still another, it appears to overlook completely the findings of bodies such as the Montreal Catholic School Commission, 1972, and the National Council of Welfare, 1973, which found a close correlation between low income and malnutrition.

In its report "One child, one chance", the latter points out that while nutritional ignorance is common to rich and poor alike, those with an adequate income, often through overeating, are able to establish margins of nutritional safety. Those on low income are up against a situation where rising living costs force them to first meet fixed expenses such as rent, utilities and transportation. Food becomes the flexible item in the poor family's budget. What is left over from fixed expenses can be spent on food, a precarious approach to good nutrition.

It was the consideration of this fact that caused the Special Committee on Trends in Food Prices to include in its first report to the House of Commons on April 2 of this year the following recommendation:

That the federal government, in co-operation with the various provincial governments, consider the feasibility of co-sponsored programs to get proper food on the tables of people with low income.

To my knowledge, the government has taken no action whatever on this recommendation. To our many inquiries it replied that the Canada Assistance Plan stands ready to fund 50 per cent of any such program proposed by any provincial government. That is not good enough. The members of the food prices committee were well aware of the Canada Assistance Plan when drafting that recommendation. We were well aware, also, that some of the provinces simply cannot afford to fund 50 per cent of the costs of such programs to supply the nutritional needs of their people.

● (2200)

What we intended to press for, and what we still press for, is leadership from Ottawa and a greater share of the funding—up to 75 per cent or 100 per cent. The need is great. Many hon. members have by their questions lately drawn special attention to the heavy extra burden being placed on low income people by the rising cost of heating oil and motor fuel. These are costs which must be met but which cut into the amount left for buying food. And look what is happening to food prices. To give one single example, a letter from Saskatchewan today encloses the tops of two boxes of Creamettes macaroni. The boxes are identical—the two-pound family size. One was bought on August 24 and cost 45 cents; the other was bought on November 23 and the price had gone up to 65 cents, representing an increase of almost 45 per cent in just three months. Both were bought in the same O.K. Economy Store, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Loblaws.

[Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver Kingsway).]

Yes, I know about the increased cost of durum wheat, but I also know that macaroni is one of the food staples of the poor, a budget-stretcher, a substitute for the meat they cannot afford. Small comfort for these people to be faced by the confident image of the Loblaws manager who explains, "More than the price is right. But, by gosh, the price is right!"

An hon. Member: Hear, hear!

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver Kingsway): It may be right for Loblaws, but it is wrong for the poor and it is wrong for the government which has the duty to protect their living standards. I am glad to see the minister in his place tonight. I want to ask him again: What is the government going to do about the recommendation of the food prices committee concerning the nutrition of people on low incomes?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Lalonde (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I have listened with a great deal of interest to the remarks of the hon. member. I know that she was there when I was called before the standing committee of this House which deals with the matter of food prices. I then said that those who wrote the report on nutrition in Canada had reached some conclusions, but that we were taking those conclusions further and examining in detail certain elements worthy of further study, including in particular the situation of low income groups.

Moreover, the hon. member mentioned that there had been no studies concerning the native Indian and Inuit peoples. On the contrary, a study has indeed been made on Indians and Inuits and the relative report contains some recommendations. We plan to publish a complete study on this subject next spring.

When the hon. member suggests that certain provinces cannot afford to pay 50 per cent of social welfare costs, I would like to remind her that these provinces receive substantial amounts in the form of equalization payments which have been considerably increased again this year, to reach close to \$100 million more than last year. I am pleased to see that the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) is in the House tonight, for he was the one who suggested this measure in the budget speech. Such a measure would help greatly low income provinces.

Mr. Turner (Ottawa-Carleton): Exactly.

Mr. Lalonde: With regards to the case mentioned by the hon. member relative to the increase in heating costs, I would remind her again that in most provinces the real heating costs are absorbed by public welfare programs, and as a result, there is no reason for which low income people in these provinces have to cut down their food budget to pay their heating costs. I personally communicated with my colleagues in other provinces to urge them to take special steps for that purpose.

Finally, as far as Saskatchewan is concerned, I can hardly believe that such a province, with its present revenues, is unable to pay 50 per cent of the additional cost of food and if the small wage earners of that province are unable to feed themselves properly it is the responsibility of that provincial government which is free to adjust the