

Anti-Inflation Act

Mr. Epp:—less than complimentary. Thank you. It is about on a parallel with the abject performance the Prime Minister gave at Red River community college. When asked very serious questions by students, in a very flip-pant manner he put aside the questions in a way that was not becoming the leader of this country. We have seen another minister of the front benches on television. In order to see ministers today, you have to watch television, because they are not in the House. We watch television at eleven o'clock to see whether the ministers are still alive and well.

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): And it is worse in colour.

Mr. Epp: That is right. In fact, their colour is draining rather badly, and quickly. Yesterday we saw the Minister of Labour (Mr. Munro) on television. He was appearing before the Canadian Union of Public Employees. He obviously used the premise that was used by a minister in a small community: when the minister was not able to be present to deliver his message one Sunday morning, he asked an elder deacon to deliver it. The minister had the sermon written out. At the appointed time on Sunday morning, the elder started reading the sermon. It was a very fine and stirring message. In true homiletics, there were three points. When he came to the third point, the elder deacon stopped. It stated, "Weak point. You can fill in the rest of the words". Possibly that is what the Minister of Labour was doing yesterday; he was simply labouring in an area he feels rather unqualified to talk about.

Government members today are also rather embarrassed about trying to explain this policy, particularly when they do not have their heart in it. They have been asked by the Prime Minister and other members of the caucus to get out, beat the bushes and tell Canadians that a prices and incomes policy is now necessary even though it was not 10 or 15 months ago. I feel that the performance will have to improve considerably if Canadians are to believe one minuscule part of what they are trying to say.

At least the former minister of transport had one saving quality or grace: when he thought there was a mess, he said so. He admitted there was a mess in his department. If the Prime Minister has a mess, he does not recognize it. The Prime Minister is now trying to reverse himself, do a 180 degree turn and say to the Canadian people, "Look, I was not wrong in July, 1974. I am still not wrong in October, 1975. Circumstances have just changed. All I want to do is be elected. This was my prime aim in July, 1974, and again in 1975 I will lead you through the wilderness." Well, the wilderness has been created by this government.

The bill now before us is to combat inflation. It is entitled "An act to provide for the restraint of profit margins, prices, dividends and compensation in Canada". Our rate of inflation is double-digit, roughly twice that of the United States. We decried them; this government criticized the United States and its investment in this country. They have used good principles. I think it is often a knee-jerk reaction because it is from the United States. They say we are still better off because we have twice what they have in the United States. Also, we are much ahead in our inflation rate compared to the European Common Market.

[Mr. Epp.]

Our rate of unemployment stands at 7.2 per cent. The only saving factor is that in some areas such as the prairies, commodity sales have been very strong internationally and prices have been holding. If that were not the case, unemployment in this country would be higher, certainly in the prairie region. We must recall the history which has brought us into this current economic crisis, this mess I have mentioned. We all remember 1968 when a then unknown man was elected as Prime Minister. At that time, he declared that inflation was public enemy number one. Of course, he is now public enemy number one. However, in 1968 it was inflation.

The government embarked on various policies. This resulted in increased unemployment and the fight against inflation was quickly abandoned. Less than two years after the pronouncement that inflation had been singled out for defeat, the Prime Minister clearly stated that inflation had been wrestled to the ground. To my mind, it was just another con operation of a master artist. He has been doing this from 1968 on, trying to show the Canadian people the side of the coin he thinks is most acceptable for his purposes at any given time.

● (1740)

In 1972 we saw evidence of a backlash on the part of many Canadians. They rapped the government's knuckles. Then a curious thing happened. From 1972 to 1974 another picture was painted by the chief architect of this mess, the Prime Minister. He said we could do nothing about inflation because inflation was imported from beyond our shores. We have always conceded that a certain amount of inflation has been imported, but we were also contending that as a sovereign people there were certain things we could do to reduce the domestic component of inflation. But to suit his short-term political purposes, the Prime Minister sought to convince Canadians we could do nothing about inflation. In the meantime, I suppose, the back-room boys were wringing their hands, hoping that the terrible Americans, the ugly Americans as many in the government think they are, would bounce back and that the economic picture generally would brighten.

We come to 1974. That also is history. As a party, we did not receive the support of the people for our economic policy. We accept this. But at least in 1974 the people in Canada had a choice between the party now in power and the official opposition. We have no regrets for having placed before the Canadian people what we thought was needed by the economy at that time. Sometimes it is important to take a position which is honest, one which you know in your heart to be right and one which does not compromise your integrity, rather than adopt a short-term political solution as the Prime Minister did.

In taking the position he did, the Prime Minister had in mind short-term political advantage in the election in 1974. I might say in passing that the Premier of Manitoba became an embarrassment to his friends in the House, the members of the New Democratic Party, because he, too, said, after examining the situation, being a man of honesty and integrity, that we were going down the road of inflation so quickly that a policy of price and income restraint ought to be imposed. He was faced at the time with meeting a level of payment to public servants in Manitoba which he said the province could not afford. While mem-