

Food Policy

provides us with a basic guide for development of policies and programs for the food sector.

Turning, now, to the strategy itself and to those aspects of special interest to consumers, I would begin by reminding the House that while there is concern about the importance of good nutrition to the health of Canadians about new foods and additives, and about food quality generally, in recent years the main concern of consumers has been with the level of food prices. In the period 1972-75, food prices increased 50 per cent, due largely to events in international grain markets and general inflationary trends. The action taken by the government to protect consumers against these price increases included subsidies on some important foodstuffs including milk and bread. Food prices decreased between mid-1975 and the end of 1976, but there has been a resurgence of food price increases in recent months. The food component of the consumer price index is now over 70 per cent higher than in 1971. It is important, therefore, that the government's food policies and programs assure all Canadians of an adequate supply of safe and nutritious food at prices which are reasonable to consumers and producers alike. We believe our guidelines will enable us to give that assurance.

The government's food strategy represents a set of basic principles to guide the development of policies and programs for the food sector. For consumers, the primary aim is to reassure them that not only is the food marketing system fair and efficient, but also that their interests are taken into account along with those of producers, processors and others, in any government involvement in the food industry.

I would now like to highlight those principles that are of particular interest to consumers. While Canadian consumers need not worry unduly about the sufficiency of food resources or supplies for the foreseeable future, the government intends to work to conserve and restore, where necessary, scarce resources which are essential to food production. The government will use and develop its food policies to encourage the food system to provide food and food services in the simplest, most economical and most direct manner and in the most nutritious and useful form to meet the needs and demands of consumers.

Let me highlight a few new plans of direct value to consumers. We will provide regular price information to consumers on basic foods. We will strengthen the food inspection services. We will work with the provinces to develop national food inspection guidelines. We will strive to improve the productivity, efficiency and competitiveness of food production, processing, distribution and retailing. We will ensure that all appointments to boards, agencies and other institutions utilize widely experienced persons and that the views of producers, processors and consumers are adequately represented.

Mr. Fraser: Aren't you doing that now?

Mr. Abbott: We will improve the structure, procedures and public knowledge of these bodies. We will give increased emphasis to food safety and good nutrition both federally and in collaboration with provincial governments.

[Mr. Abbott.]

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I must point out that the strategy represents only a beginning. Much work remains to be done to flesh out the principles we have enunciated in our food strategy into specific policies and programs. This we will be doing over the next months and years. I hope that initially the strategy will stimulate public debate and provide a basis for consultation between the federal government, the provinces and the private sector. For my own part, I would invite consumers and their representatives to communicate to me their views on the strategy, the principles it contains and the next steps to be taken.

Mrs. Jean E. Pigott (Ottawa-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, it is a delight to see we now have the "Bobby Twins" in the cabinet. I was reminded by statements this morning of the ancient Chinese proverb, "Talk does not cook rice". It is ironic that these statements by the two ministers with direct responsibility for food policy should have been made on the same morning that Statistics Canada reports a further major increase in food costs in the country. That is one side of the problem. The other is that the continuing escalation in food prices is occurring during a period in which net farm incomes in Canada are actually declining. As is so often the case with this government, here, too, it has managed to give us the worst of both worlds.

In this unhappy situation one would have hoped the statement might have provided us with some evidence that the government has a clear sense of direction with regard to the all-important question of a national food policy. But, again, this is not a government which has a sense of direction on anything. Thus, predictably, we are given yet another discussion paper full of the kinds of generalities which have marked the publications put out by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Macdonald) on the basic course of economic policy.

It is worth recording that when the anti-inflation program was announced some 20 months ago, the government in its white paper at that time drew attention to food policy as one of the major sectors to be dealt with during the "breathing space" provided by wage and price controls. Yet it has taken us until today, more than 20 months later, to get even a discussion paper out of the government. The reason for this delay is, of course, known to all of us. It is simply that the two ministers involved, the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) and the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Abbott), are in total disagreement over the basic issues at stake here.

Notably absent from the front page of this document are the names of the other ministers who one would expect to be concerned with these issues. Where is there mention of the Minister of Fisheries (Mr. LeBlanc)? Where is the Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce (Mr. Chrétien)? Where is the Minister of State for Small Business (Mr. Marchand)? Where is the Minister of Finance, the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde), and the Minister of Transport (Mr. Lang)? As for the ministers from whom we have just heard, I must congratulate them for at least getting their two names together on the same title page. I only hope there is