

AGRICULTURE—REQUEST FOR PROGRESS REPORT ON
RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF SUGAR BEET INDUSTRY

Mr. J. R. Holmes (Lambton-Kent): Mr. Speaker, I asked to take part in the adjournment debate this evening because the matter of the sugar beet industry in western Ontario relates like a fairy tale, with the author being the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan).

● (2220)

On October 4 I asked the minister first if he would present his long awaited national sugar policy and, second, if he would indicate what progress he has made toward fulfilling his commitment to re-establish the sugar beet industry in southwestern Ontario. The minister's response can be found on page 124 of *Hansard* for that date. Suffice it to say we still await a national sugar policy, and the question of re-establishing the sugar beet industry was evaded.

I believe it is relevant to review the drama of the sugar beet story which has created uncertainty and frustration among a large segment of the farm community. I find it inexcusable that a large number of farmers genuinely concerned in revitalizing the sugar beet industry are but pawns in a game of politics.

Let me briefly review the story. In 1968, after an intensive investigation of the technical, social and economic aspects of the sugar beet industry, the government embarked on a program of lower trade barriers to cane sugar and the maintenance of low sugar beet production in Canada.

Let me remind you that the government of that day was the Liberal party and the policy of that day was supported by the Minister of Agriculture. As a result of that decision the last time beets were grown for the C. & D. sugar refinery in Chatham was in 1968.

The dust had barely settled when the Liberal Party had incorporated, as part of a local agricultural policy, the re-establishment of the sugar beet industry in southwestern Ontario. In the election of 1972 we had the unique situation of a sugar policy in Ottawa calling for a reduction in sugar beet production and a policy in southwestern Ontario calling for an increase in sugar beet production and a refinery.

What has happened since the election of 1972? During the last parliament the minister spoke in Chatham in January, 1973, and again in Tilbury during the month of February. On both occasions he pressed the point about establishing a sugar beet industry. Let me quote here from the *London Free Press* of February 24, 1973, when the minister said:

"I want a solid brief from those farmers to show that there is genuine interest in setting up a sugar beet industry here in Ontario. The next step will be to convince interested companies to set up a plant to handle the crop. If it can be shown farmers are willing to produce a large enough crop to allow for economic operation year in, year out, I think they will put up the refinery."

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"That's what I mean when I say that I want a national sugar policy. There's a heck of a lot of work still to do, but I think we can do it, and I think we can get a new industry for our farmers."

Mr. Speaker, let me remind you that during that same period of time, the two policy era, the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) had introduced a budget in which he proposed a tariff reduction of 30 cents per 100 pounds of imported raw sugar, clearly supporting the position of 1968.

Again on December 17, 1973, as recorded at page 8795 of *Hansard* the following exchange took place:

MR. JAMES A. MCGRATH (ST. JOHN'S EAST): Mr. Speaker, I ask the Minister of Agriculture, by way of a supplementary question, whether, in view of the very serious situation regarding the sugar market and the effect this will have on the cost of living in Canada, he is now prepared, after two years, to bring in his sugar policy?

HON. E. F. WHELAN (MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE): Mr. Speaker, my sugar policy is not two years delayed; and by the time the two years are up you can be sure we will have a new sugar beet industry and a new sugar refining industry in western Ontario and a policy for all of Canada.

I specifically asked my question last Friday because this matter was shelved during the recent election campaign and frankly, sir, the minister's response has not been reassuring.

I should like to quote from the "Lambton Farmer" of February 14, 1973. There is an article entitled "Can Beets Come Back? Some Say It's Wrong," which reports an interview with Professor Donald Thain of the School of Business, University of Western Ontario. He was a member of the federal task force which produced the book "Canadian Agriculture in the Seventies". The article quotes Professor Thain as follows:

"I'm certain this is happening now because the Liberals are in a vulnerable position," said the western professor. "They need votes. This couldn't have happened two or three years ago because they didn't have to be concerned then about buying votes with sugar beets."

I am not going to accuse the minister of such tactics. I am a reasonable man and I am prepared to accept his promises as genuine and sincere. However, I believe that time is running out. I believe the minister is responsible for presenting a national sugar policy to parliament. Sir, he made a commitment to establish a sugar beet industry in southwestern Ontario, an industry which he said earlier would be in operation by the end of 1974. In conclusion I simply ask the minister either for honesty or for action.

[Translation]

Mr. Léopold Corriveau (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Agriculture): Mr. Speaker, I join my colleagues in congratulating you on the position you have been called to hold.

The hon. member asked two questions: 1—Whether the Minister of Agriculture could advise the House of his national policy on sugar, and 2—What progress has been made with regard to his commitment to restore the beet industry in south western Ontario.

In his reply, the minister mentioned some of the problems that will have to be studied, adding that his department is working on them and that he will submit a report to his colleagues as soon as possible.