

Oral Questions

Opposition. He is just speculating, and I cannot argue on speculation.

Miss MacDonald: Deny it, then.

GOVERNMENT POSITION

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Leader of the Opposition): Madam Speaker, does the Minister of Justice deny that the Government of Canada is considering a unilateral reference of the offshore resource question to the Supreme Court of Canada?

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Social Development): Madam Speaker, when the right hon. member says "unilateral reference to the Supreme Court", I remember some months ago when the Leader of the Opposition was urging us to refer directly to the Supreme Court of Canada. Why would it be bad today when a year ago he was arguing that we should go to the Supreme Court?

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

QUERY RESPECTING GOVERNMENT CONSIDERATION OF REFERENCE

Right Hon. Joe Clark (Leader of the Opposition): Madam Speaker, is the Minister of Justice and the Government of Canada considering a direct unilateral reference of the offshore question to the Supreme Court of Canada? It is a simple question. Yes or no?

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Minister of Justice and Minister of State for Social Development): Madam Speaker, I said that there has been no decision made by the government at this time on that question. The question that the right hon. member is asking me today is a very surprising one. He used to tell us that the best thing to do in difficult circumstances was go to the Supreme Court. Now, if I decide to take his advice for once, I hope he will applaud me.

Mr. Nielsen: Are you?

* * *

AGRICULTURE

INCREASE IN BANKRUPTCIES—REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE TO FARMERS

Hon. John Wise (Elgin): Madam Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Agriculture. Citing the government's own figures, the indication is that farm bankruptcies have increased by 70 per cent during the same term this year compared to the same term last year. I am certain that the minister should know that Canadian agriculture faces the worst financial crisis since Confederation. It is obvious that existing programs are

not appropriate. FCC funds have been exhausted, and the banks are not issuing any small business bonds. In view of this situation, what new programs is the minister considering bringing forth shortly and, if there is no assistance forthcoming, perhaps the minister might provide some information as to what we might tell some of these young farmers who are going down the tube?

Hon. E. F. Whelan (Minister of Agriculture): Madam Speaker, the hon. member states that nothing was done. He knows full well that it took some time to amend the Farm Credit Act. His party was responsible for ringing the bells for three weeks so that legislation could not have third reading and could not move ahead with that legislation. He now indicates a sign of urgency that something should be done. I agree that there is a need. The Farm Credit Corporation gave me a report yesterday. They are moving rapidly in that area where many members want them to head, to raise funds to loan money. The hon. member does know that some of the markets have improved rapidly over the last couple of weeks. Prices have improved for them in many areas, especially in the red meat industry.

When he says that all agriculture is in worse condition than it was before, he knows full well that bankruptcies in agriculture, if he wants to compare them to any other sector, such as small business, are not as great. There is hurt out there, and we are doing something about it.

TAXES ON FUEL USED IN PRODUCTION OF FOOD

Hon. Don Mazankowski (Vegreville): Madam Speaker, since the Minister of Agriculture knows that one of the major components contributing to this agricultural massacre is the high level of fuel prices caused by the high level of federal government taxes, what specific representations has he made on behalf of the farmers of Canada to his colleague, the Minister of Finance, to encourage him to reduce this massive rip-off at the expense of the producers of food in Canada?

Hon. E. F. Whelan (Minister of Agriculture): Madam Speaker, the hon. member makes representations about the high energy costs.

Mr. Mazankowski: Taxes.

Mr. Whelan: We have made a study of this. We have made surveys of the crops being planted this spring. In the areas where farmers are already planting there is hardly an acre that is left unplanted. We are planting crops as much as we ever have. We also have had discussions about what we can do to reduce energy costs to the producers of foodstuffs in Canada.