

Oral Questions

I realize that money has not flowed to the farmers yet but it is on the way.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean Chrétien (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Speaker, I would like to repeat my question to the Minister of Finance. The agricultural industry, not only in Western Canada but across the country, is up against a very difficult situation. During the past few months, government ministers gave Ontario and Quebec farmers the assurance that Canadian producer boards were not threatened by GATT.

And now, all of a sudden, we read in the papers this morning that the Minister for International Trade and the Minister of Agriculture, who were in Mexico, were dispatched on short notice by the government to Geneva to discuss the matter of producer boards. Could the government tell Canadian farmers whether in addition to the problems facing western farmers, we are about to lose our producer boards at the current talks in Geneva?

Hon. Pierre Blais (Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs and Minister of State (Agriculture)): Mr. Speaker, I imagine that when he says "producer boards", the hon. member is referring to our agricultural marketing boards. The Canadian position, which is shared by all Canadian farmers, is that we not only support keeping article XI but we are also seeking clarification and reinforcement of that article. The Canadian position, which affects farmers across the country, is something we built together.

As the Leader of the Opposition just mentioned, the Minister for International Trade and the Minister of Agriculture are now in Geneva, with Canadian representatives of the agricultural industry, and they have been asked to continue to pressure both the Director General of GATT, Mr. Dunkel, and other delegations to maintain and reinforce article XI. That is the Canadian position, and we do not intend to change it.

[*English*]

Mr. John Harvard (Winnipeg St. James): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Deputy Prime Minister who says that his government is doing its best for farmers.

The fact is that the best of this government this year is not as good as what it did last year. Figures from

Statistics Canada tell the story. In the first nine months of this year direct payments to farmers fell \$700 million. That is 45 per cent.

The question is: Why has it chopped assistance to farmers when they need it most?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, we have not chopped assistance to farmers when they needed it most.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Mayer: They laugh. We just announced \$800 million a year ago. Do you want to laugh at that?

I was in the Soviet Union a month ago and the government provided \$500 million of assistance to farmers that will let us sell 4 million tonnes of grain on behalf of western farmers.

We are in the process of putting out money under both NISA and GRIP, as the Deputy Prime Minister said, that is going to result in almost \$3 billion being in the hands of farmers by next June. That is not an insignificant amount of money. I suggest it is an increase in the amount of money, if we include some of the other things we are doing like picking up the deficit in the wheat pool accounts and also looking at writing off the deficit in western grain stabilization.

That is a very large amount of money that represents an increase by this government at a time when farmers need it most.

Mr. John Harvard (Winnipeg St. James): Mr. Speaker, allow me to try the Deputy Prime Minister again.

The future of many farmers is not measured in months or years. It is often measured in days or weeks. In Saskatchewan two farm families leave the soil every day. Yet this government is telling farmers that many of them will have to wait until spring for their emergency help. For many farmers that will be too late.

My question for the Deputy Prime Minister is: Why does the government refuse to make its payments this year? Why do farmers have to wait until spring?

Hon. Charles Mayer (Minister of Western Economic Diversification and Minister of State (Grains and Oilseeds)): Mr. Speaker, the member does a disservice by using that kind of explanation. That is not the case.