

this bill, introduced by the hon. member for Mackenzie, is to ensure the orderly marketing of potatoes, having due regard to the interests of producers as well as consumers.

At first, I thought a bill that introduced changes in the marketing system as it affects producers and consumers was entirely justified. Since I am not an expert, however, I decided to get in touch with a number of agencies and potato producers to find out what they had to say. In fact, I met a dozen potato producers in Quebec and several in New Brunswick, who were astonished that a federal member would bother to call them and even go to see them to find out what they wanted, and who thanked me for taking the trouble.

I wanted to make sure this bill faithfully reflected the needs of this particular sector. People actively involved in this agricultural sector were quick to explain that the changes proposed in Bill C-266 did not suit them at all.

Before deciding how to change existing procedures, we must understand the forces at work in the current potato marketing system. Apparently, there are no national regulations on potato prices. This means that the market is controlled by interprovincial marketing decisions. In other words, the provinces are self regulating.

At this point, perhaps I may recall that four years ago in New Brunswick, the fall harvest was exceptionally abundant. To maintain potato prices, the provincial and federal governments and the New Brunswick association of potato producers agreed to destroy several tonnes to keep prices as high as possible, since the crop was well in excess of demand.

This approach makes it difficult to set up a system under which all provinces would have to conform to the same standards.

• (1135)

The idea of setting up a national mechanism is not new. In the early 1980s, the provinces were consulted about the possibility of setting up a mechanism of this sort. From the consultations, it was obvious that the positions of certain regions were totally irreconcilable.

The western market, for example, is import based. It is the complete opposite of the eastern market, which is largely export driven. Furthermore, it appears that many provinces have a potato producers association of their own. Since regional objectives may vary, the roles of these associations may be diametrically opposed.

Let us take a look at the Fédération des producteurs de pommes de terre du Québec by way of example. It is a labour organization and has both a political and a marketing focus. The Manitoba association, on the other hand, is concerned strictly with marketing.

Quebec potato producers have had a dual scheme since 1979. It covers advertising campaigns as well as the control of potato quality. Moreover, as many producers have their own packing companies, they look after selling their products themselves.

Private Members' Business

They have created a customized marketing system for themselves. What more could you want, Mr. Speaker?

As I see it, the provincial producers are already well organized. They develop their own markets and their own way of operating. I do not see any point in centralizing and messing up a system that works the way the people using it like it. As I said earlier, I met with several of them and they recommended that I not support Bill C-266 tabled by the hon. member for Mackenzie.

Furthermore, a working group was created in 1990—as was mentioned earlier—to evaluate the various options for implementing a potato marketing system, to evaluate, for instance, the advisability of establishing a Canadian potato board or to examine the possibility of setting up a supply management system or other options. The group had to interrupt its work in 1990 and never produced a final report. And even if they had concluded their work in some way, their findings would no doubt have been overtaken by market developments.

In view of free trade, previous studies would perhaps be less relevant today. GATT and NAFTA have changed the rules of the game. Were it indeed advisable to create a national system as proposed in the bill, one would first have to consider all the new aspects of today's market.

If my information is correct, this is not the first time a measure such as Bill C-266 has been presented in the House. The aim of the member proposing this bill, namely to assist potato producers, is most admirable. Bill C-266 shows a desire to bring together producers and consumers. Research in this area could be financed, for example, by deductions from producers, as is the case for wheat and barley under Bill C-50 regarding the Canadian Wheat Board, which the House of Commons passed before the holidays.

• (1140)

There is, however, a major difference between these two sectors. Grain producers themselves asked to be able to make this kind of contribution. In my opinion, there is no need to respond to needs that potato producers have not expressed. Let us look at it this way: western grain, barley and wheat producers had asked the House of Commons to pass this kind of bill; potato producers did not and have no desire to do so.

Besides, it may seem advantageous to promote a product by pooling all available resources. However, if the objectives of the parties are irreconcilable, as is the case with the provinces, pretending to cover all bases by trying to put producers and consumers into the same mold can only throw a wrench into the works.

In closing, I would simply like to inform the hon. member for MacKenzie that, unfortunately, the Bloc Québécois will not support his bill since all the farm producers, all the potato producers from Quebec who were consulted do not see the need for it and unanimously asked us to oppose the bill, which the Bloc Québécois will do.