

Food Prices Committee

tee of inquiry to get at the facts, to ascertain what each sector of the food industry contributes to rising prices. The committee must take time to come up with concrete recommendations to place some control on the movement of food prices. That is what we should be doing, Mr. Speaker.

The direction of the trend in food prices is upward. During the past two years the food component of the consumer price index has risen by over 17 per cent. The organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, at the end of 1972 in its assessment of trends for 1973, warned that in Canada the outlook for prices is a matter of concern. It warned that prices which have already gone up could be the forerunner of price inflation all along the line. I believe we should heed the words of the OECD in the work that we are setting out to do.

Although we were all pleased the other day to hear the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde) announce that we could expect "a substantial increase" in pensions, I would ask him what is the use of increasing old age pensions, or any other pensions, if we do not take steps to insure that the pension increases are not immediately gobbled up by other increases, of which the price of food is the greatest menace? We have to protect the living standards of our people, otherwise the business of raising pensions is merely a farce, an exercise like pouring water through a sieve, and an exercise in futility. What most people across the country want is a measure of stability in their living costs, and this at a level they can afford.

The minister pointed out that it is six years since the end of the previous prices inquiry. Actually, it is nearly seven years since that committee started its investigation of food prices. What happened as a result of the investigation at that time?

Mr. Howard (Skeena): Basford got into the cabinet.

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway): Yes, there were various little side effects, but the main thing was the establishment of the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, even though I still regret that the corporate part was added to the consumer section. Also, Mr. Speaker, some safety measures were enacted, and I do not decry them. These were necessary in respect of clothing, drugs, and hazardous substances of various kinds. We also did something along the line of packaging, labelling, and the handling of consumer complaints. But we took no action on food prices, in spite of the final recommendation made by that committee of which I had the honour to be a member. It was that the Joint Committee on Consumer Credit Prices continue its investigations of concentration in the food industry. No action has been taken on that recommendation ever since the day in April, 1967, when we tabled our report. In my view this is unfinished business. This is where we come in now. This is where we must start the new inquiry afresh.

Over the years some of us tried to get that recommendation implemented. Last June, as more senior members of the House will recall, in the very limited time at our disposal the NDP tried to get the government to establish a special committee of the House to look into the matter of food prices. Because of the shortage of time, the investigation could not have been a thorough one. Even so, it could

have had some particular effects. However, the government would have nothing to do with it. The government put forward all kinds of excuses. It said that rising food prices were a worldwide phenomenon and we could do nothing about them. The then minister of consumer and corporate affairs said that increasing food prices had only been the trend for a month or two, and that we should not do anything drastic because things might settle down. The Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) contended that higher prices were due to poorer crops. Undoubtedly, these things are all factors, but they are not the whole answer to the question of why food prices have been rising so drastically.

Now, we have the consumers again demanding that something be done about food prices, and we have the government saying, as it has done in respect of other matters lately that it is in a receptive mood and is listening. I hope it is, because the proposed committee will test the receptiveness, ingenuity and ability of members on all sides of the House. There are cynics in the House who think that the committee will do nothing but a whitewash job. There are others who say, "You cannot control food prices; it is nonsense to think you can." There are others who think the farmers will be picked out and pilloried in the same way as the Prices and Incomes Commission picked out the wage earners and tried to pillory them. In passing I would point out that later its chairman declared that wage settlements had had very little effect on the over-all picture.

There are other members of the House who are afraid the taxpayers will be hurt. Over all this there is the honeyed propaganda of various firms in the food industry, saying the consumers are living in the best of all possible worlds, crying that those in the food industry are on the point of going out of business, claiming their profits are very low, and pleading that we should leave them alone. The other day a media representative asked me, "What makes you think you can hope for something better this time as a result of the proposed food inquiry than we had in 1967?" There are one or two answers to that, Mr. Speaker. The first is that we are now six years closer to monopoly control and dictatorship by the conglomerates that run the food industry in Canada. A second is that a number of countries have started experimenting with their own patterns, to try to control food and other prices. It is no longer possible to say that this cannot be done, that nobody else is doing it.

I refer to the efforts of three countries well known to us—Sweden, the United States and Great Britain. Sweden began its control measures in 1970, the United States began its in 1971, and Great Britain just last November. There are variations in the ways they have been trying to undertake this. They have all had their faults and their failures. There has been a great deal of criticism of these plans from outside and inside. Not one of those countries is completely happy with what is happening as a result of the measures it has taken, but I would like to point out to hon. members of this House that not one of those countries is letting go. Having started on this road they know they must continue. Although they have had to change, modify and switch their tactics and control machinery, not one of those countries now hopes to go along without a precise piece of monitoring machinery such as a prices