

Food Prices

clude his evidence. Instead, he sent his deputy minister with a press release which tried to substantiate his contention that food is a best buy.

The Minister of Agriculture showed us three diets compiled on costs in the city of Ottawa on February 15; one a moderate diet, the second an intermediate diet, and the third a generous diet. I will deal with the moderate diet because this concerns the main point of the minister's argument. This moderate diet, which runs all the way from stewed chicken for dinner on Monday to meat balls for dinner on Sunday, cost an average family of four \$28.50 a week in the city of Ottawa. I sent copies of this diet to a number of consumers in my own province, and they all came back with the same finding. After having taken this list to their supermarkets, they found that the cost for the same diet in the province of Newfoundland was exactly a third more. So, the minister's contention that food is the best buy is probably a good argument if you are lucky enough to live in southern Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia, but if you happen to live on the peripheries of the country, in slow growth areas, where unemployment is the highest, where costs are the highest and incomes are the lowest, then you can only conclude that the minister was speaking for a very small constituency when he made that statement.

Poverty is a factor in Canada. I am only sorry the committee did not have time to hear sufficient evidence on this. The Economic Council of Canada, in its fifth annual report, states that 1.5 million families, or 22 per cent of all family units in Canada, are below the poverty line. It sets out its guidelines as follows: a one person family unit will have the poverty line set at \$2,013, a two person family unit at \$3,355, and all the way through to a five person family unit where the level would be \$5,368. The Senate Committee on Poverty also had a lot to say about this, and I would recommend its report to members of the special committee. The Senate Committee on Poverty found that the over-all poverty rate in Canada is approximately 25 per cent; this is virtually the same as the finding of the Economic Council of Canada.

• (1630)

We talk about food being the best buy. That is all very well if you happen to be in or above the middle income bracket, but if you happen to be in that unfortunate 25 per cent or to live in a slow growth, high unemployment region of this country, the proportion of your dollar that is spent on food is increasing. Steak has only gone up by 1 per cent, hamburger has gone up by 18 per cent, pork shoulder by 28 per cent and roast beef by 5 per cent. Eggs are a very important item in a stable, nutritious diet and in the past year the price of eggs has risen by almost 47 per cent. The menu proposed by the Minister of Agriculture is totally unrealistic and unacceptable, even to those who can afford it. If you want to have the ultimate in a nutritional diet for the least possible price, I suggest that you buy dog food which is the cheapest and possibly the most nutritious food on the market today. But who wants to eat dog food? I suggest to the minister also, who wants to eat meat balls and gravy?

The committee's major recommendation deals with a Prices Review Board. We believe that this should be the kind of action to flow from a freeze that would have to be

[Mr. McGrath.]

placed on all prices in Canada as a very first step. We believe this is necessary because all of the evidence indicates that prices will continue to increase.

The other recommendations of the committee are worth-while and we want to make it very clear that we support them. In order to present our own report however, we have to abide by this device of not concurring in the majority of recommendations because we did not support the principal recommendation which calls for what would amount to an ineffective Prices Review Board. In our opinion, this would be just as ineffective as the recent Prices and Incomes Commission.

The hon. member for St. Paul's (Mr. Atkey) will have more to say about the second recommendation of the committee because this is basically the recommendation for which he argued. It calls for changing the Competition Act so that those areas of the act dealing with misleading advertising be put under the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs and become a separate act.

We agree with the third recommendation of the report which reads:

That the government give consideration to the advisability of introducing legislation governing the nutrient content of foods sold to the consumer and requiring nutritional labelling because it is imperative that nutrition information be brought home to the consumer.

Everybody knows this is a fact. In this country nourishment is a problem of major proportions. There is evidence to indicate that there are children in this country today who are undernourished because of an inadequate diet; they are going to school on an inadequate breakfast. In the committee we heard a brief from the advertisers which supported the fact that advertising is not a major component in the high cost of food. The average percentage of advertising in the cost of food was between 1.5 per cent and 2 per cent, until we got to breakfast cereals where it rose to a whopping 11 per cent. The reason is product proliferation and the need for cereal manufacturers to sell this unnutritious junk food. Wheat germ has been removed from it and by the use of powerful and subtle advertising techniques children are induced to eat cereals which have no nutritional value whatsoever. There is no question in my mind of the need for the third recommendation of the committee.

The fourth recommendation deals with the media in consumer education. There is a definite need for that. The Croll-Basford Report resulted in the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs which has been about as effective as the Prices and Incomes Commission. The Prices Review Board proposed by the hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway would be about equally effective.

There is a need in Canada today for a real consumers department and for a minister who is consumer oriented. The present incumbent seems to be oriented toward the corporate end of his portfolio. Perhaps a case can be made for a separation of the two levels of responsibility. Perhaps the corporate responsibilities of the minister should be returned to the Minister of Justice (Mr. Lang) where they properly belong.

Mr. Baker: There is a conflict of interest.