

*Food Prices Committee*

With respect to the motion before the House, Mr. Speaker, it is one that any member of this House would find it difficult to quarrel with, but on the other hand one would have to ask the question, "Why was it left to this session to deal with a matter that has been one of great concern and immediacy for such a long time?" The great P. T. Barnum has been credited with saying, "There is nothing new under the sun". I feel that we could say the same about the motion we are debating. The problem has been around for so long, and so much has been said about it, that it would be difficult to add anything new to the arguments that have been presented.

Previous speakers in the past few days have pointed out that the serious problem of inflation in the specific area of food prices has been with us for a number of years. The problem has been debated over and over again. Many speakers of the Conservative party, including our very able leader, have been for the past four years urging the government to come to grips with the matter and propose specific measures that would root out the factors involved and provide solutions. My colleagues on this side of the House have called for expressions of concern by the government and they have called on the government to provide some evidence that it is willing and able to exercise leadership in this area of concern to so many Canadians.

Mr. Speaker, I am in favour of establishing a committee such as the one proposed in the government's motion. I am in favour of any sort of machinery that might be effective in assessing factors involved in trends and fluctuations in food prices. However, we are debating a measure that will become effective only at some time in the future, and desirable as that might be I would have preferred to have the government begin by asking the House to approve a crash program that would have become effective immediately. I would have preferred to see the House set into motion some type of interim machinery, such as a task force, that would be looking into the problem and suggesting remedies during the weeks or months that it will take the committee to become operational.

Many of the factors involved in the recent spiral of food cost inflation are already known to us. Many others might be brought to light quickly and easily by a task force and at least some action might be undertaken before the committee can be assembled and its terms of reference approved. I realize that it might be interpreted as brash or presumptuous for a new member to suggest that this House is approaching the problem of inflation in respect of food prices from the wrong direction, but I hope that that interpretation will not be placed on my remarks. I am simply expressing deep concern over a matter that has concerned me for a number of years, long before my election to parliament.

Any of my colleagues who watch television even occasionally will be aware of the constant barrage of television advertising inflicted on the consuming public by the national chain store operators. It is constant and it is, in my experience at least, telecast in prime viewing time and this is expensive. I should note at this point that one advertising campaign features the Canadian actor who starred in the television series "Star Trek", a series that dealt with outer space. I do not know whether or not he was selected on the merits of that particular show, but it is

appropriate because some of the stuff he delivers to his audience is pretty far out.

It is my view that in this particular case we are dealing with two factors which figure largely in the present high rate of increase in food costs. We have a prime example of saturation-type advertising on the most expensive of our media, and obviously the cost of this advertising must be borne by the consumer. Secondly, as a consumer I would question the claims that are made on some television commercials. This is one of the areas where I feel a task force might make some immediate assessments and press home to the food industry as a whole that it is about to come under the scrutiny of a very concerned House of Commons.

There are other factors that are known to us which figure in a very significant way in food costs. Food retailing is moving more and more in the direction of a controlled industry operating out of the multi-million dollar shopping plaza concept. This is supposed to take all the pain and inconvenience out of shopping, but there is a real danger now that the concept has been oversold. With regard to the claim that the glittering plaza takes the pain out of shopping, those who make this claim do not take into account that people who suffer most in the process are those who can least afford it. The great shopping plazas and the new concept of prepackaged foods add to the cost of the products being merchandised. Add to this the massive and expensive advertising campaigns and other gimmicks that have become a part of grocery merchandising, and you have the ingredients of a process that tends to militate against a very significant segment of the buying public.

Those who are being hit hardest by this situation are in the low and middle income brackets. Statistics have shown that consumers in the low income bracket spend as much as 27 to 28 per cent of their total income on food. Those in the middle income groups spend 18 to 20 per cent of their total income on food. As food becomes increasingly more expensive, these people spend an increasingly larger percentage of their total income on food.

This is a vicious and cruel spiral. While one could say that those who are forced to suffer most from the spiralling cost of food are defenceless, that is not quite true. We are their defence, Mr. Speaker. We, their representatives in parliament, are their defence. That is the main reason I feel we must move with speed in coming to grips with this problem. We might find that the retailing of food and other necessities of life is concentrated in a few hands. We might find that the needs and the well-being of the buying public are being disregarded in this tendency toward bigness in the food industry, as in other industries. We might find that either now or in the near future our anti-combines laws will have to be called into play to curb this alarming tendency toward bigness.

• (2100)

I do not want to give the impression that I favour measures designed to stifle or hamper the growth of industry and commerce in our country. I do not want to imply that I fear healthy and measured progress in our corporate community. I leave that sort of alarmist gimmickry to the socialists. I only want to examine and