

Food and Drugs Act

I think we saw in the smoking legislation that was just passed an example of political Parties getting together to deal with an important problem. When Bill C-204 was first introduced there were flaws and changes had to be made. However, once it was referred to committee the three political Parties sat down and worked on it so that it came back to the House in a more acceptable form and it actually became law.

[Translation]

I hope we will have the same opportunity with this Bill. Because what we are talking about here is the right of consumers to know the basic facts about what they eat away from home. It is all very well to say that if you have allergies, you cannot eat away from home, but for all practical purposes, in the world of 1988, it is not always possible to eat at home.

First and foremost, my Bill applies to the 24 largest companies, i.e. the big chains, not the small restaurants, because it would have been too difficult for small businesses to comply. But if you start with the 24 major companies like McDonald's and Wendy's—we know all the big chains—they already have set menus and it is not too difficult. Even company representatives have admitted that several of them already have the ability to put on the package the specific ingredients in hamburgers or whatever.

Mr. Speaker, I do not say that my Bill is perfect, because obviously we can have changes. All that I would hope, on behalf of dozens of people who have died—about a dozen die every year from allergies, others are hospitalized—is that the House decides to refer the Bill to a committee for further study.

Because some faults can certainly be pointed out in my own Bill one might say, for example, that I have given the Minister the right to define a “chain”, because I did not want all small businesses to be affected. So I said that if it is up to the Minister to decide what a “chain” is, he can decide that only the largest companies are included, or if there are other ways to inform the public about allergies, smaller companies could be involved. It depends on the Minister.

All I ask is that the House find this question sufficiently important. Mr. Speaker, I have received more than 10,000 petitions on this subject already. I have received about a hundred letters. The office of the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) tells us that he has received more than 4,000 letters of support for a bill concerning food and a list of ingredients in food.

Mr. Speaker, the Consumer's Association of Canada supports my Bill, and apparently, although I have yet to receive the letter, the day before yesterday articles in the newspapers said that the Ontario Medical Association was supporting my Bill as well. More than a dozen members of school boards in the Province of Ontario have also expressed their support. The Canadian Council on Children and Youth is very interested. The Association even called our office for

more information, and the director said he would personally support the Bill.

I think that even if there are some specific problems regarding my approach in this Bill, if the House agrees with the principle—we would start with the big companies, asking them to list the ingredients on the container—the whole subject could be referred to committee for more detailed consideration.

This morning, some students came to see me and asked me what we do in Parliament. I think we can say that we work together. Parliament is not just Oral Question Period and confrontation. We can also do a good job together. With the Hon. Member for Burlington (Mr. Kempling), and I know the Hon. Member for Chatham is interested and other Members who agree to proceed, I hope that we will be able to proceed as soon as possible, if the House decides to support my Bill.

• (1720)

[English]

Mr. Benno Friesen (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Employment and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Member for Vancouver East (Ms. Mitchell) for yielding her place in the order of speakers so that I could speak next. I appreciate that very much.

I want to compliment the Member for Hamilton East (Ms. Copps) on the issue she has brought forward. It is a very critical issue in our lives today. It is a much more widespread problem than most of the public realizes. It so happens that a member of my staff suffers from the same kind of allergy as she described in the young man whose parents came to see her. In the case of my staff member, if a knife is used to cut a Christmas cake, for example, and then used to cut something else and he eats that other food, that is enough contamination to make him choke.

I know this is a very serious and very widespread problem. However, there is an additional problem. The Member talked about natural foods. There is a growing problem related to this, that is, the increasing use of chemical additives by commercial establishments to preserve food in order that it has a longer shelf life and, in some cases, supposedly to enhance the flavour. However, these chemicals are increasingly becoming a danger to many Canadians.

It so happens that my wife and I were attending a conference a few years ago outside of Canada. She went to a local restaurant and had just a portion of a shrimp omelette, a very innocent looking meal. Yet, within hours she was going into second degree shock because of an additive called metabisulphide. She had to receive extensive treatments of Prednisone to counteract that chemical.

An additional problem with this is the inertia which exists in the Department of Health where officials ought to be proactive on this issue. When we returned from that trip my wife took the time to do some research on it. She went to her doctor