

### Food Prices

According to the report of the Senate Committee on Poverty—and I might say that this is an excellent report and one which has been largely ignored by this government—in 1971 a family earning \$3,000 a year, which of course is well below the poverty line by today's standards, spent 27.9 per cent of their income on food. A family earning up to \$9,000 a year spent 18.8 per cent of their income on food and those lucky enough to earn \$15,000 a year spent 13.4 per cent of their income on food. If we update these figures from 1971, Mr. Speaker, to take into account the rate of inflation since then, we find that the \$3,000 a year income family now spends approximately 31.2 per cent of its budget on food; the family earning up to \$9,000 a year spends 21 per cent of its budget on food and the family earning up to \$15,000 a year spends approximately 15 per cent of its budget on food. So you can see, Mr. Speaker, that these figures give us some idea of the crisis situation we are in and the toll that inflation takes of the working poor.

The low income groups of this country and the unemployed of this country are the hardest hit. That is why it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand why this government ignores this crisis. Low income earners have come nowhere near keeping up with the 15.8 per cent yearly increase in the cost of food since August, 1972 and they have come nowhere near keeping up with the almost 50 per cent increase in the cost of food since 1961. The minimum wage in this country is still below \$2 an hour and, unfortunately for many, the minimum wage is often the maximum. I remain convinced that rising food prices and inflation are the chief causes of labour unrest in this country.

● (1550)

Nutrition is a critical factor in poverty, one which is often forgotten. The children of poor families must eat, too. It is well to refer to a recent study in Montreal which shows that 20 per cent of the population of Montreal lives in poverty. Also, 44 per cent of that city's slum families are undernourished. Yet still the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan) and the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Gray) tell us that food is a bargain, even at today's prices.

All the consumer education available in this country, all the consumer protection, consumer laws and shopping skills, are meaningless if you do not have sufficient income to put food on the family's table. That, Sir, is the problem facing many in this country today. According to the latest statistics available, and according to the Economic Council of Canada, one half million families, or 22 per cent of all family units in Canada, live in poverty. They live in poverty according to the definition of the Economic Council of Canada. That is why the committee recommended in its second report that the government pay special attention to implementing the recommendations in the first report and consider immediately a program to provide food directly to low income Canadians.

In its first report, the committee recommended that the government of Canada immediately proceed to promote a federal-provincial sponsored program to get food directly to the children of this country who suffer from malnutrition—that is a strong word. In other words, the committee desired to get food to the working poor of this country, to

[Mr. McGrath.]

those who live on fixed incomes and to those who live on welfare. I consider that to be an urgent matter, when one considers the 3.2 per cent increase in food costs in one month. That is why I consider the work of this committee to be of an urgent nature.

It would also be well to refer to two of the other recommendations of the second report. I do not mean to downgrade any of the recommendations of the report, because we helped to draft the report and we support it. We only say that it does not go far enough.

Recommendation No. 8 reads:

Because an adequate supply of essential food is vital, the Committee recommends that the Federal Government consider the advisability of immediately implementing policies to encourage farmers to increase steadily the production of staple foodstuffs on a basis that will provide a fair income for the farm family and basic food at a reasonable price for the consumer.

My colleagues will have more to say about that during the course of this debate. Recommendation No. 9 reads:

The Committee recommends that the Federal Government consider the advisability of protecting the Canadian market from the pressures of world food requirements by ensuring that domestic prices reflect domestic demand and supply.

We suggest that consideration should be given first to the domestic consumers of this country but, at the same time, we must ensure that Canadians can take advantage of world market conditions. That has always been our policy and we have never advocated any other.

As the hon. member for Qu'Appelle-Moose Mountain (Mr. Hamilton) said last Thursday during the emergency debate on the consumer price index, this country has probably the greatest food producing capability of any country in the world, and it follows that we ought to provide incentives to our farmers so that they will produce more food.

Because of the 3.2 per cent increase in the cost of food during August, because of the failure of the government to deal adequately with this serious situation and, as well, because the Food Prices Review Board under its present terms of reference is powerless to act and cannot meet the present situation adequately, as we have said before, now repeat, underline and cannot emphasize too greatly, the hon. member for St. Paul's (Mr. Atkey) will move an amendment to send this report back to the committee. I hope the government will permit this amendment to come to a vote. I hope the government will be seized with the same sense of urgency with which we are seized and permit this amendment to come to a vote, as this will give the NDP an opportunity to demonstrate and underline their concern, as expressed by their leader in the statement of September 13. It will give that party a chance to demonstrate to Canada that it is not really hanging on to the coat tails of the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau). Perhaps if they give us that support, if the amendment is allowed to come to a vote, we may be in a position to force this arrogant and heartless government to do something soon about rising food prices in Canada.

Mr. Terry Grier (Toronto-Lakeshore): Mr. Speaker, as I listened to the remarks of the hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath), I was struck by his somewhat selective version of what took place in the committee, the report of which is being discussed this afternoon. I was