

Oral Questions

Mr. Clark: Madam Speaker, the fact, which apparently escapes the notice of the acting minister, is precisely that it is not a normal situation. It is not a normal situation when the economy of Manitoba is threatened to the extent of perhaps half a billion dollars because of a drought crisis that only this minister would regard as being normal.

The minister said—and I quote him exactly; I noted his words down—“all those measures are in hand”. Does that mean that the Government of Canada intends no further action? The railways are acting and the government of Manitoba has acted. Indeed, the government of Manitoba acted on Monday because it stated it could wait no longer for the federal Treasury Board to act.

Is the Government of Canada not planning more action? Why did the federal Treasury Board not act? What is this government going to do, and what can it tell the farmers of Manitoba and the members of this House of Commons about the plan of action it has to deal with the situation that is most certainly not normal to the farmers, who are suffering a crisis of drought in western Canada?

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Pepin: Madam Speaker, to a certain extent, the Leader of the Opposition is describing the situation well. The CN is acting, the governments of the provinces are acting and the federal government is acting. That is the way to deal with that particular situation.

Mr. Clark: Madam Speaker, let me deal with one aspect of the federal government's action. This minister will know that the government has established an advisory group to the task force on the drought. Will the minister confirm that there is not one single Manitoban on that advisory group, and will he give us an immediate commitment, now, to establish a mechanism on behalf of the Government of Canada which will bring together, under federal leadership, municipal and provincial representation and ensure co-ordination in dealing with the devastating effects of the drought in Manitoba?

● (1420)

Mr. Pepin: Madam Speaker, I will certainly bring these suggestions to the attention of the Minister of Agriculture, who has the main responsibility in this area.

Mr. Clark: Madam Speaker, I will direct this question to the same minister, even though he may try to shove it off on someone else. The Premier of Manitoba indicated that his province is assuming there will be forthcoming from Ottawa a \$14.3 million contribution by the Government of Canada as Ottawa's full share in dealing with the drought. That is \$14.3 million that has not yet come. Will the minister now give this House and the farmers and people of Manitoba a clear commitment that Ottawa will honour at least that contribution of \$14.3 million?

Mr. Pepin: Madam Speaker, as the Leader of the Opposition indicated in previous questions, it is not only a matter of

money; it is mainly a question of putting into motion the necessary instruments to cope with this drought situation. For example, when the Minister of State for the Wheat Board allowed imports of feed grain from the United States, that was an important move.

It is not only a matter of saying we have allowed \$14 million, more or less. Government action should not be judged exclusively on that basis, although I recognize it is one of the factors in this equation. The government has indeed put a number of millions of dollars into this process.

DROUGHT IN WEST—ASSISTANCE TO FARMERS IN MEETING
LOAN PAYMENTS

Mr. Jack Murta (Lisgar): Madam Speaker, I wish to direct my question to the Minister of Finance. People in Manitoba and Saskatchewan will be trying to salvage what little is left of the agricultural economies of both provinces.

We have a situation in which farmers, young farmers in particular, and businesses which depend on agriculture have expanded. In many cases they will face severe economic crisis and possibly bankruptcy. Will the government consider some type of moratorium on debt in those two provinces, in terms of working with the credit unions and banks to try to stretch the loan payment that will be coming due in the next few months over a longer period of time, so that we do not have bankruptcies caused by an act of God in those two provinces?

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance): Madam Speaker, I have not considered the question of a moratorium. The hon. member has indicated the difficulties which those who have loans may face in the future. Drawing upon the experience we have had with individual home owners who were renegotiating their mortgages with lending institutions, it was possible in that case to work out suitable arrangements which got those affected over the situation. It may be possible in these circumstances to do something similar. I thank the hon. member for his representations and will consider whether anything can be done short of a moratorium.

Mr. Murta: Madam Speaker, I assume the minister is indicating to the House he will give this request some attention and urgency because it is very serious. My supplementary is to the Minister of Transport in his capacity as acting minister responsible for the Wheat Board. He mentioned the fact that permits have been issued to allow barley and oats into Canada for feed supplies. Incidentally, there will not be enough feed for western cattle unless more is found.

My question is this: duty is still imposed by the federal government on grain coming into Canada, specifically barley, oats and alfalfa pellets. Will the government give consideration to taking off the duty? In the case of barley, it is about seven cents a bushel. Will the government give consideration to doing this because of the emergency situation that has developed?