

*Food Prices*

Third, it would provide funds to school boards, at their request and with the agreement of the provinces, for hot breakfasts or lunches.

I see that I have only a couple of minutes left and I have only been able to outline in the barest possible way the points which we believe are essential in legislation to deal with this problem and which we hope the government will be considering. I want to warn again that this is not a problem which affects only the low income groups. They need this special treatment to help them to survive in the interim because in the interim their children are growing and children who are undernourished in their early years, can never catch up either mentally or physically. These are things which should be attended to at once. But we are confident that a prices review board is the first step to sanity in providing consumers in general with the food they must have to live at a price which is consonant with its real value.

This report must not be pigeonholed. People across the country are waiting and looking for action now. They are waiting for legislation to deal with the matter now. If we could establish this board and start it functioning, the Food Prices Committee would have a life of much shorter duration because this board could do a much better, more effective and thorough job of investigating the food industry than we are able to do, however hard we may try.

I want to conclude with both a warning and an appeal to the government that the time for action is now. The consumers of this country are not going to be content with boycotts. They want action in an orderly fashion, and if they do not get it from this government they will try something else that is better, fairer and faster.

• (1620)

**Mr. James A. McGrath (St. John's East):** Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway (Mrs. MacInnis), who moved this motion, ended her speech with a call for action. She suggested that the consumers of this country were impatient and were demanding action. Mr. Speaker, I can only say to the hon. member, who was an active participant in the committee and whose contribution is always welcomed, that she will not get that action out of this report.

The report which is now before this House completely negates the order of reference of this House. That order called upon the committee to report action in two months. There is nothing in this report that would implement such action. Indeed the only major recommendation of the report, that dealing with the prices review board, would be about as powerless and ineffective as the late, unlamented Prices and Incomes Commission.

I had difficulty following the hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway because there were times when she seemed to be coming down on both sides of the argument. I can certainly understand the conundrum she is in, because obviously she is compromised in a very difficult situation. Deep in her heart she knows that in order to approach the whole problem of spiralling prices you cannot isolate food prices. It must be approached in an over-all context, and that has to include the whole spectrum of prices, incomes, salaries and wages. Wages and income are a major com-

ponent of the spiralling cost of food, and so I can understand her difficulty.

This committee, which had been meeting for the past two months, was a good committee. It worked hard. It met on an average of twice a week, sometimes three times a week, from 9.30 in the morning until 12.30. It achieved something which is rather rare these days under the new rules. It achieved a degree of collegiality. Indeed, it can be said that a consensus was developing in the committee. That consensus was developing from a sense of complete and utter frustration, born of the inability to find answers to the questions we were directing to the parade of witnesses who came before us. Our complete and total inability to cut through the "PR" jargon of all the briefs was really the thing that united the committee more than anything else. But, Sir, I do not believe there was any consensus among the members of the committee with regard to this report.

This report represents only the views of the party to my left, the NDP, and their partners in coalition, the Liberals. It in no way reflects the views of the ten PC members of the committee who approached the matter from the point of view that in order to cope with the very serious problem of rising food prices it must be approached from the over-all picture. In order to come up with a mechanism, with a device that would be effective in keeping prices within acceptable levels, there should be an across the board freeze on prices and incomes. I say this because ever since the committee was first referred to in the Speech from the Throne, and ever since its establishment, the committee itself has had the effect of building up anticipation in the minds of the people engaged in the food industry in Canada that there would be government controls, or a freeze. That anticipation has been a major factor in the spiralling costs of food. Indeed, the price of food will continue to increase because that expectation will continue to exist until the government shows courage enough to take the necessary action.

Let us take a look at the consumer price index. The over-all index for November showed 5.1 per cent. For December it was still 5.1 per cent. In January it was up to 5.7 per cent; in February up to 5.8 per cent, and in March up to 6 per cent. For food for the same months, in November it was 9.1 per cent, December 8.6 per cent, January up to 10 per cent, February up to 10.2 per cent and March up to 11 per cent. If there was one common thread running through all the evidence heard by the committee it was that prices will continue to rise.

We heard evidence from the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Gray) which was contradictory to the evidence from the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Whelan). The first minister could not account for the substantial increases in the price of food for the month of December, January and February, because he admitted that the harvest factor, which had an effect on the price of food last year, was simply not a factor this year. But the Minister of Agriculture came before the committee and told us, "You have never had it so good. Food is still the best buy." The Minister of Agriculture went on to talk at great length about this. Then, he showed a certain contempt for the committee by not appearing on the next scheduled day when he was supposed to appear to con-