

Western Grain Stabilization Act

In the Bill the time period over which averages are taken has been reduced from five years to three years. This is something for which Hon. Members, such as the Hon. Member for Humboldt-Lake Centre (Mr. Althouse) and the Hon. Member for Prince Albert (Mr. Hovdebo), have pushed many times during debates in the House of Commons. They have pushed for changes to the Western Grain Stabilization Act.

Some three months ago the New Democratic Party released a policy paper on agriculture which contained what we consider to be alternate proposals for grain income stabilization. We agree with the Canada Grains Council that a plan amalgamated with crop insurance should be tailored to individual needs, sensitive to individual income fluctuations and to regional discrepancies. That is the best way to proceed. We still feel that is the best way after much discussion within our own caucus and with farming people across the country. Unfortunately the Government does not agree. I hope it will give consideration to some of the amendments we will put forth in committee and that we have speedy passage of this Bill.

In terms of an income insurance plan, we would like it to be actuarially sound, voluntary and attractive. It should be attractive so that all farmers, whether big or small, involved in co-operative or partnership farming, or whatever, become involved and see it as a benefit. If we opened up the Western Grain Stabilization Program and allowed people to leave it, I am sure there would be a mass exodus, unless some of the changes we have recommended in the House of Commons today and in previous debates are implemented. Although I recognize that the changes of the Government are an improvement, they are certainly not tailored to the needs of western Canadian grain farmers. There would be an exodus of people from that plan unless it is tailored to meet their needs.

Another feature of the program could be participation by producers, the federal and provincial Governments. The income insurance plan would be as integrated as possible with the existing crop insurance program to avoid duplication in the recordkeeping and administrative services necessary to carry out an adequate program of this magnitude, especially in terms of its impact upon the western economy and upon the Canadian economy in general.

The federal contribution would be in the form of reduced premiums that people would have to pay for the program. The provincial contribution would be primarily to expand the crop insurance administrative capability to meet the requirements of an income insurance plan. It would generate a greater volume of work for those who administer the plan at the present time. I would like to see the federal Government talking with the provincial governments about crop insurance programs to see if they would be willing to take on a greater responsibility to meet the needs of farmers within their respective provinces.

Finally, we recommend that farmers be able to insure for both volumes shipped and market price. A variety of insured price levels would be offered with appropriate premium levels to reflect the wide variation in production costs.

Those are a few examples of what we in the New Democratic Party think should be in place as an alternative to the Western Grain Stabilization Program. In fact, we would be very happy if Hon. Members of the Government and of the Official Opposition would at least debate and consider in committee the value of our suggestions, and our policy on agriculture as it pertains to the Western Grain Stabilization Act. If these suggestions were accepted, we would have a program much better tailored to the needs of western Canadian grain farmers than what we have had in the past.

In closing, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this debate today. I hope government Members will take note of our suggestions, given as constructive criticism to improve the program and meet the needs of a sector of the economy about which we are very concerned. Hopefully Bill C-33 will move out of the House and into committee at the end of the debate today. Then we can look at some of the changes and, hopefully, give it speedy passage, so that farmers who need money to continue their operations will receive it as soon as is viably possible.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Guilbault): Are there any questions or comments relating to the Hon. Member's remarks? Debate.

Mr. Arnold Malone (Crowfoot): Mr. Speaker, I must say at the outset that the Bill before us is both important and serious. However, the chance of giving a false impression with respect to it is dangerous. It is easy to conscience people who are following this debate on television, or will be reading it in Hansard or perhaps Members of the House of Commons, that we are debating a Bill which is aimed primarily or solely at western Canada. Although the primary emphasis of the Western Grain Stabilization Program is to feed money back to Canadian farm producers on the Prairies, this Bill will have an impact upon all Canadians—food consumers as well as industrialists who purchase western Canadian products. It must be seen in the light of its importance as a national Bill.

Bill C-33 gives too little too late; it is too pompous and too political. It is too little because it is less than the investment of farmers in the stabilization plan. It is too late because it comes considerably after the period of sowing crops, when cash flow was needed prior to seeding. It is too pompous because the Government stood on its pedestal and released a nine-page press release to the nation. It is too political because it comes on the eve of an election.

With nearly \$1 billion in the Western Grain Stabilization Fund, farmers do not even get back their own money. They have contributed almost one-third of the investment in the fund today, but what will be given back to them will be in the neighbourhood of only \$300 million.

Today different people have referred to the Minister as the Minister for External Relations or as the Minister for external affairs. I hope the Minister knows the difference between affairs and relations.