

Private Members' Business

products is left in the hands of the private sector, with no demand for or need for government involvement.

In the north the situation, as the hon. member has indicated, is dramatically different. Many communities are isolated and do not have year round surface access so food supplies must be delivered in some cases by air and in other cases by sea. Perishable foods, which as a rule are the most nutritious, are very difficult to arrange for in some of these communities. The expense of transporting perishable foods to remote communities increases their cost to consumers. The hon. member provided the House with a list, the variety of which I have seen in my northern experiences.

These areas are not only isolated but they are often economically depressed. In some communities unemployment is as high as 85 per cent. Many families are living on social assistance, supplemented by whatever commodities they can harvest from the land.

The northern food mail program therefore is vitally important. It subsidizes the cost of shipping perishable, nutritious foods to isolated northern communities, and puts these basic necessities within the reach of northern families. On many of the flights I have taken to various places in the north I am aware that the plane is filled with bread, eggs, milk and other perishables that are shipped to these communities. However, even with the assistance of this program, it is extremely difficult for families to afford the proper and nutritious food that is demanded. Without the program it would be virtually impossible to do so.

I again stress that the prices the hon. member listed are not exaggerated. I am not exaggerating when I say the situation in the north would be desperate without this program. Government studies show that a family of four in isolated communities in the Northwest Territories would have to spend between \$260 to \$280 a week, or between 85 per cent and 110 per cent of their after shelter income for a basic diet. That is about twice the cost of a comparable basic diet in southern Canada.

I would remind hon. members that Canada is a signatory to the United Nations declaration on the rights of the child. One of those rights is the right to adequate nutrition. Children should not go hungry, especially in our country.

There can be no question in my submission as to the need for the program. The only question is what form the government subsidization for food distribution or food costs should be. We stress it is essential for the health of northern residents. It is also fair to say that the current program is achieving its intended purpose, notwithstanding the suggestions made by the hon. member.

The northern food mail program is strongly supported by the communities it serves, by the food distribution companies, by the merchants that form part of the distribution system and by the consumers. Canada Post, which ships food products and other essential goods by air, has been a willing and vital partner in the program.

• (1830)

In spite of all that, I commend the hon. member for Saint-Jean for urging the government to reconsider the current northern food distribution system. There is always room for improvement and governments should be continually looking at new approaches to program delivery.

Therefore I am extremely pleased to inform the House that the government has already taken steps to re-evaluate this program. In April the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the Minister of Health committed their departments to a full review of this essential service for the next year.

This review will build on an evaluation of the program that was undertaken by consultants last year. It will include consultations with all the key stakeholders, including northern residents, merchants, air carriers, provincial and territorial governments, and aboriginal organizations.

This consultation process is fully in keeping with the red book commitment, and I know the hon. member has read the red book extensively, to ensure that aboriginal people are fully involved in decisions that affect their lives. Toward this end, regional consultation meetings will be held in the north this September and October. Written views and recommendations will also be accepted by the government.

My hon. colleague will be particularly pleased to hear that an interdepartmental committee is currently looking at terms of reference to guide this review. In addition to Health Canada and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, the committee has representations from the Departments of Finance, Agriculture, and Human Resources Development, the Treasury Board and the Privy Council Office.

This review will look at the issue of food distribution in the north from a very broad perspective. It will not just consider how much money is being spent or needs to be spent under the northern food mail program. It will address the fundamental question of whether or not this is the best way to ensure that northerners can meet their needs for food and other essential goods that are currently shipped under the program.

It will review alternatives for food distribution and food costs subsidization including income support to ensure that people have money to buy the essential foods. The role of local food production, processing, and inter-settlement trade will also be considered.