

Anti-Inflation Act

This year it plans to spend almost \$45 billion—an increase of 500 per cent. The minister calls that restraint. The hard reality is that, thanks to a decade of total irresponsibility by the government, the national finances of this country are virtually out of control. One need look no further than the last budget of the Minister of Finance for confirmation of that fact. This government has spent so much and planned so badly that the budget runs a \$7 billion deficit and still leaves more than one million Canadians out of work. This government has spent itself right out of any opportunity to exercise a positive influence on the Canadian economy.

Sir, faced even with this dismal record, the most this government is prepared to commit itself to regarding restraint is to hold the line, to hold its spending increase to the rate of increase of the gross national product. Having governed for a decade in which the proportion of gross national product taken by governments has climbed from 29 per cent to 43 per cent, this government now says it is prepared to level off for a while. That is just not good enough. We on this side of the House are committed to reducing the government's take from the economy—not keeping it at a constant level—because that is an essential first step to restoring confidence in the Canadian economy.

We have had controls in this country, sir, for 20 months—20 months during which we might have expected some initiative by this government to deal with some of our more deeply-rooted Canadian economic problems. You will remember, sir, that when this program was introduced in the dark of the night, without any warning, on pre-empted television time—as has become too much of a habit of the government—the government gave us a long litany of commitments, of things they were going to do during the period of controls. We were to get a comprehensive energy policy. Where is that comprehensive energy policy?

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): We do not even have a comprehensible minister.

Mr. Clark: We do not have a comprehensible minister, and we do not have a comprehensive energy policy which we were promised as a condition for accepting this period of controls. We were told we were going to have a national food policy which would be brought in during the period of controls. We now have a document, introduced the other day by Mutt and Jeff—I do not know which minister is which—and the ministers cannot agree if it is a policy or strategy. They cannot even agree on the semantics, let alone on its substance. That is the second absolute failure to keep a promise which was made as a condition for accepting controls.

We were told we would have an effective housing program. We must admit that the control program has had some effect on housing in this country. It has driven a great deal of the investment which could be made in Canadian housing, south of the border so that there are houses in the United States which could have been built in Canada if it were not for the controls program we have in place right now.

We were told that there would be, as part of the condition for accepting controls, an examination of regulatory policy. We have not had an examination of regulatory policy, but we have had a proliferation of regulations. We were also told that we were to have, if we accepted controls, an improved system of collective bargaining. As my colleague from Vancouver South (Mr. Fraser) said the other night when he participated in this debate, we have had nothing of the kind, because the government of Canada has not made any serious effort to use the time we bought with controls to bring about the reforms which Canadians were promised as a condition for accepting controls.

However, we have had one other activity during this period. We have had a multitude of meetings and discussions around a concept called voluntary restraint. This process, as the House recalls, started more than three years ago under the previous minister of finance, and to this day—I am not sure of his name—no one knows exactly what the Government of Canada is expecting from business and labour in the matter of voluntary restraint. But they are asking for changes from meeting to meeting and speech to speech.

In this debate, the Minister of Finance said that he wants “further assurances as to the active advocacy of policies of restraint we can expect from these groups.” That means he wants them to get out and actively advocate restraint which, as one must admit, is entirely consistent—because that is all the government has been doing in the name of restraint throughout the controls program. Of course, he asks of business and labour a commitment to participate in his semi-annual talk-in, that process of public education from which, in the best traditions of this government, the public and the House of Commons will be barred. Sir, that is simply a farce. With great respect, the minister knows it is a farce. We accuse the Minister of Finance of a lot of things, but nobody on this side has ever accused him of being stupid. He is not stupid. He knows that the people he is talking to cannot give him any binding commitments on behalf of business or labour.

Mr. Fraser: Right on.

• (1630)

Mr. Clark: He knows, too, that there is not a room big enough to get into it all the people, the thousands of economic decision-makers in this country, who would have to join in a massive cartel to create any meaningful program of voluntary restraint. The minister knows that, yet he plunges on with the charade. Why? Because it is a convenient substitute for the government accepting its responsibility to lead. Even more seriously, because it is a convenient set-up for this government to play its favourite game of blaming the other guy for all the country's problems. It is a set-up to make the people of Canada believe that only the irresponsibility of the private sector is preventing concrete action in this area. Sir, that is not only dishonest; it is totally unfair to business and labour leaders who have shown more responsibility in this matter than anyone on the government benches.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!