

Oral Questions

Today, each farmer produces the food that 65 families need. Nevertheless, most farmers' wives must work off the farm just to make ends meet.

Is the Prime Minister prepared to provide emergency aid of \$1.3 billion in new money immediately? Is he prepared to help these farmers not next week but today so they do not lose their farms, their daily livelihood?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill McKnight (Minister of Agriculture): Mr. Speaker, according to what was said in the House yesterday and on several other occasions since 1985, this government has understood the difficulty in rural Canada.

This government has increased the expenditures in the agricultural area some 650 per cent.

The hon. member is quite right. The agricultural industry in this country produces high quality food. Canadians spend less than 15 per cent of their disposable income in food.

I can tell the hon. member the ongoing discussions that we have had concerning the third line of defence with various agricultural groups will bear fruit. The hon. member will have to wait. We understand the urgency and are addressing it in that way.

• (1420)

Mr. David Kilgour (Edmonton Southeast): Mr. Speaker, the most recent bankruptcy figures released today show that in the month of August one farmer a day went bankrupt in Saskatchewan. Last year, this government cut farm support programs by \$1.3 billion and it has refused all year to provide an emergency aid package of \$1.3 billion in new money for Canadian producers.

How many more farmers have to leave their farms, their homes and their livelihoods before this government will announce a program of emergency assistance for our grain farmers?

I would like to ask the Prime Minister or the Minister of Agriculture: Why won't you put cash in the pockets of farmers right now—

Mr. Speaker: I would ask hon. members to remember that we have a tradition in this place that questions are put through the Chair and not directly to the minister.

Hon. Bill McKnight (Minister of Agriculture): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the hon. member's new-found interest in agriculture and I presume it is sincere. The hon. member says "Why won't you do it today". The hon. member is fully aware of the difficult decisions that government has to make in order to bring a deficit that was created by the party he now represents under control.

We have in the past been able to address the needs of Canadian agriculture. As I have said on several occasions, prior to September of this year, over \$500 million had moved to Canadian agriculture, particularly for grain and oilseeds producers. Between now and the end of this year some \$1.5 billion will flow from the safety net programs GRIP and NISA. Before seeding next year there will be an additional \$1.1 billion. The producers, the provinces and the Government of Canada have contributed to this action.

I say to the hon. member that we recognize that that is not enough. The Prime Minister has recognized it is not enough. This government will do its best to address the shortfall which we recognize. I hope the hon. member will recognize it when it is done.

Mr. David Kilgour (Edmonton Southeast): Mr. Speaker, as we speak some 7,000 farmers and their urban supporters are gathering at the legislature in Manitoba. Towns have closed down. Something like 80 buses have brought people to Winnipeg today for a gathering to demand action which should have been forthcoming last year, as the minister knows. The government has known about the problem for months and has done nothing.

What is the Prime Minister waiting for? Another midnight call from Grant Devine? When will the Prime Minister and the government stop playing politics with our farmers? When will the government put 1.3 billion new dollars in the pockets of men and women across Canada?

Right Hon. Brian Mulroney (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh.