

Food Prices

food, nevertheless it focuses sharply on that question and I think it is incumbent upon this House to deal with it.

The prices review board recommended in the report is an independent board; it provides the framework upon which it is the responsibility of the government to construct, through legislation, specific and muscular powers dealing with food prices. It is true that the report does not contain any specific reference to powers with teeth, to powers for which we in the New Democratic Party have asked for some years. I must say that although members of my party on that committee tried to have established a board with teeth, we received precious little help from hon. friends to my right.

● (2100)

Mr. Alexander: Stick to the script.

Mr. Grier: However, I think it is significant that nothing this report says places obstacles in the way of the government's assuming the responsibilities that the hon. member for Northumberland-Durham (Mr. Lawrence) says that it must assume, and nothing in it prevents the provision of teeth. In her speech last week, the hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway (Mrs. MacInnis) told us in detail what kinds of powers should be given to that board. It is now up to the government and to the minister to respond. I say to the minister that this is no time for the establishment of a token review board; this is no time to back away from this concept; this is not the time to refrain from giving it the powers for taking the action that we all know is necessary. I urge the minister not to confuse caution with wisdom. In this case, the path of wisdom lies in taking action.

The powers which we of my party have sought for this board, and which we look to the government to provide, must include the powers of effective analysis, which involves an adequate budget, an adequate staff and adequate powers to require statements, material and evidence. I must say that I had some real doubt as to whether the special committee had those powers, but let me say that the board ought to have them.

I want to see this board holding hearings in public and making its recommendations in public. We should prefer that this board be empowered to take action on its own. However, if it will sit more easily with the minister, we believe that the recommendations of the board must be made public and that the minister ought to respond to those recommendations within a period of two or three weeks. As well, Mr. Speaker, the board must have the power to suggest a wide range of action, including in specific or selected cases the power to roll back prices. It must be given the power to provide the consuming public with all the publicity which up to now it has been denied, and the power to recommend that projected price increases not be proceeded with.

I suggest that there are real advantages to the approach involving a prices review board as against the proposal of the hon. member for Northumberland-Durham. In the first case, Mr. Speaker, it is intended that these powers be exercised selectively, that is to say, in such a way as to enable swift and searching examination of specific areas of the food industry in which corrective action can most quickly and effectively be taken. It follows that the prices

[Mr. Grier.]

review approach does not penalize, as the wage-price freeze approach penalizes, the fair dealers, of which there are many in this country, and small wage earners who comprise the majority of our population. The prices review board approach does not legitimize and does not freeze the inequities which we all know exist in the system. It is all very well to freeze, but that only makes permanent the unfairness which we have already seen and which we all know exists. The freeze involves a crude, across the board measure which offers no hope for fairness or equity.

Moreover, I believe that a combination of public disclosure and, where necessary, corrective action taken by the board in a few well-publicized cases in which some element or other of the food chain, which may be a food processor or another part of the food industry, is not playing fair with the public will quickly break the so-called inflation psychology which is supposed to be abroad now and will assure the public, as it has not yet been assured, that we will not tolerate and that the board on behalf of the public will not tolerate a situation in which any element in the food chain is prepared not to play fair with the public.

The hon. member for Northumberland-Durham referred to the prices review board approach as being bureaucratic. I invite him to envisage the kind of bureaucracy required to support the wage-price freeze and the consequent policies which have never been spelled out but which have been alluded to by the hon. member. Let me say that if the prices review board involves some staffing, the wage-price freeze approach involves a gigantic bureaucracy. I think we would do well to acknowledge that we are facing a difficulty and complex problem which is not susceptible of simplistic solutions. I do not think the prices review board is the whole answer, but I believe it is a step—a most important step—in finally coming to grips with the problem of rising prices on behalf of all Canadians.

We have heard for some time from the hon. member for Northumberland-Durham and his colleagues about this wage-price freeze, but we have not yet been provided with any details of what it involves. Let me remind the House that not until the budget debate did this become the official policy of the Conservative party, when the hon. member for Don Valley (Mr. Gillies) apparently changed his mind. He talked in the budget debate about a freeze followed by consultations with the provinces which would lead, he hoped, to something which he calls cost stabilization policies. We do not know any more tonight than we knew then as to what is involved in these cost stabilization policies, or why we should expect from this nebulous process of consultation results which we have not received in the past from an equally nebulous process of consultation. The hon. member for St. Paul's (Mr. Atkey) last week talked about meaningful policies to fight inflation. Perhaps some of his colleagues know what those are. Certainly, we have not heard about them from the hon. member's party.

Ten years ago, Mr. Speaker, the then Liberal government offered this country 60 days of decision, and it took us a couple of years to recover from them. Now the Conservatives are offering us 90 days of dithering, at the