

*Food Prices*

basis of an economic system, to be rejected or accepted, is service to Canadian consumers.

Mr. Speaker, consumers should be protected and if they are, if their purchasing power allows it, all other social classes will be saved. Obviously, the consumer encourages the producer. Who is the producer? The farmer, the worker, the whole population. Production should be financed by consumption; then, we would not have the type of problems we now know. We would not miss the obvious, or seek silly solutions such as spending our time setting up boards, as we do now. Setting up boards does not feed the poor in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Rouyn-Noranda. But it sure empties pockets, though, you may be sure of that!

Mr. Speaker, the Cr ditiste solution is plausible; as for controlling prices, obviously we will fight them with all our might and any control measure, regardless of the party that suggests it, will certainly not get the support of the Cr ditiste members. I ask my colleagues to do their utmost to prevent the "controllers" from taking over the very life of the Canadian consumers, the Canadian people.

• (1720)

[English]

**Hon. Herb Gray (Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs):** Mr. Speaker, the debate so far has been useful in showing us the positions and, in at least the Conservative case, the lack of position, of the opposition parties in this House. The hon. member for St. John's East (Mr. McGrath) suggested there was something wrong with the order of reference to the food committee in allowing it, in effect, to deal essentially and primarily with the price of foods. Instead, he agreed its work should have been on a much broader scale. I suggest that this argument overlooks completely the fact that food prices have risen more rapidly in recent months than other components in the consumer price index. The hon. member for St. John's East also suggested that the very existence of the committee has somehow caused prices to increase rapidly in anticipation of control.

I say to you, Mr. Speaker, that if there is an increase in prices in anticipation of controls the blame for this can be put solely and squarely at the doorstep of the Conservative party. Members of the Conservative party were the ones who, day after day in this House and in the committee, were pressing the government to disclose the details of its contingency plans in regard to price and wage controls. Second, it was the Conservative party itself which formally proposed that if it had been the government it would have instituted a freeze on prices and wages to be followed by more permanent steps. They had pretensions that they might at some point—something which is very unlikely—be forming a Conservative government. Certainly, if there has been any increase in prices in anticipation of controls it has been due to a self-realizing prophecy brought up solely by the Conservative party.

I want to indicate the contradictions and divisions within that Conservative party. Its members have now suggested that they would have instituted, if they formed the government, a price freeze, including a freeze on the price of food except at the farm gate. But a few weeks

[Mr. Caouette (T miscamingue).]

before one of their principal spokesmen, the hon. member for Kent-Essex (Mr. Danforth), said that they would be introducing "some price controls on all items except food." Surely, this is an indication of the lack of clarity in their own thinking as a party, and surely this is an indication of a lack of any clear position of what they would be doing as a party in the unlikely event they might form the government. I think what they have said in this House, in the committee and outside the House, really demonstrates essentially that they have not got any clear idea of what they would do about increases in food prices and prices generally.

Hon. members of that party have called for a 90-day freeze on prices and wages, but they have made very clear in this House today and previously, that they have not the faintest idea as to what they would do at the end of that period. They do say they would not apply their price freeze to prices at the farm gate. I suggest that if this approach were ever put into effect it would likely be a cruel deception and disappointment for the farmer. They say the freeze would not apply at the farm gate, but I ask whether this would not be a freeze in fact if the farmer could not sell at a higher price, if he wished to do so, since the middleman would not be willing to buy at this price in view of the fact the increase could not be passed on down the food chain, ultimately to the consumer. What better indication could there be of the lack of decision on the part of Conservatives in this respect? I think the Conservative position is nothing more than sound and fury, signifying nothing. It is nothing but a blatant and desperate effort to score political points. This is proven by the fact that they admit the report of the Special Committee on Trends in Food Prices is constructive, and claim they agree with most of it, yet will vote against it. I submit that the report of the committee is worthy of the kind of support the Conservative party, in spite of its members' praise for the recommendations, is unwilling to give it.

As the minister who proposed the motion in this House setting up the Special Committee on Trends in Food Prices, I know of the many hours of deliberation, consideration and debate that was required to produce the report within the time limit imposed by this House. I believe, as I think most hon. members do, that it will be one of the more important documents of this parliament. There are several noteworthy points about the report. First of all, it is readable. It deals with the concern of Canadians over high food prices in language that all can understand. It does not hide behind the jargon of the experts. When the committee does not know the answer it says so. When further study and analysis is required, it proposes that it be made.

Second, the report is fair. It must have been tempting for some committee members to seek simplistic solutions to the problems of high food prices. I think it is a credit to the committee that it recognized that the factors and causes of the recent acceleration in food prices are complex and that it was not possible to seek out a villain or a particular group as the single cause.

The interim report clearly indicates that any comprehensive examination of the problem must deal not only with the primary producers, with the farmer and the