

Food Prices

share in the whole food chain. They feel that, and we know it; but while it may have added up to efficiency, efficacy and value to each particular sector and those people backing it, it has also added up to high prices for the consumer, unnecessarily high prices, and in some cases prices a way beyond the reach of a quarter of the Canadian people. These people simply cannot afford the kind of diet they should be having with the kind of prices they are having to pay now. We know that.

We know also that, although it is very difficult, new patterns must be set. We know that a start must be made on this, and we know that Canada is not the first country to try to make this start. I do not think there is any sense at all in taking refuge in the constitutional attitude and saying: we would like to do this, but of course the federal government does not have the power to do it. If you look back in history, not very far back either, you will find that there was a host of subjects on which the federal government had divided jurisdiction with the provinces. I could mention highways, medicare, housing, and many more. I know that, at the beginning, the same old arguments prevailed. They said: we would like to do this but of course it would be unconstitutional; we cannot touch it because the authority is mainly local, the initiative is local or provincial.

Yet, today we find that Trans-Canada and other major highways, medicare and housing, are being recognized increasingly as responsibilities which must be met on a three-way basis with the three levels of government participating. This has been achieved through negotiation, through devolvement of powers from one government level to another and, above all, through the will to do it. I suggest that if this government has the will to bring in legislation that will really deal with food prices, it can find ways and means of doing so constitutionally. To say that they cannot do so is no argument, and it will melt before any of the precedents that we care to examine.

If you look at the alternatives, the one that we are proposing is the only possible and workable one which offers any chance of action at this stage. The other alternatives are these: first, let nature take its course. No one, with the possible exception of one or two of the Cabinet Ministers, would care to defend such a course because we have seen that when nature has been allowed to take its course, that course is an increase in food prices over a long period of time. Second, there is the 90 day freeze. We have yet to hear from our friends to the right. Perhaps they will let us know today what they would do once the 90 day freeze was on, what they would do at the end of it, and what it would do. Surely, they have heard about Mr. Nixon's experience with the 90 day freeze, and surely they know that in the United States food prices are continuing to spiral. Surely, they are not anxious to put the Canadian people through another exercise in futility when we have had the experiment of our neighbours to the south clearly and plainly before our eyes.

Mr. Danforth: Has the hon. member seen the report from the south and the price index there?

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway): Yes, I have, Mr. Speaker and I do not think they give us any confidence in

[Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway).]

the approach of freezing inequities for 90 days, freezing high prices, and then going back to where we were before.

Mr. Baker: You have not read the report.

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway): We are not in favour of the third alternative, moral suasion, either. I have already referred to the disastrous experience of the Prices and Incomes Commission, which really boiled down to moral suasion for the powerful and legal compulsion for the scapegoats, namely, people with low incomes in this case. If members on both sides of the House will think about it they will realize that the establishment of a prices review board which we propose is the only viable way to start. When we have done this and given it a good try, if we should find that measures involving income control were necessary, then O.K., there are other steps that can be taken. But please note that we shall continue to say what we have said from the start, that we are not going to allow any group of workers to be picked out, pilloried and victimized by having their incomes frozen. If incomes are to be frozen at all, then all forms of income should be put into the pot, namely, wages, salaries, rents, interest, and profits, the whole bit.

Mr. Baker: We agree.

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway): You agree, but Mr. Nixon did not. He confined himself to wages, and that did not work very well.

An hon. Member: Don't believe them, either.

Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway): I do not and I do not think we are going to hear very much later on, but I hope we shall.

I think that speed is of the essence in this matter because the low income people simply cannot wait. This is why I want to refer very briefly to recommendation No. 5 of the Food Prices Committee which we certainly consider to be a very important one. It reads:

That the federal government, in co-operation with the various provincial governments, consider the feasibility of co-sponsored programs to get proper food on the tables of people with low income.

The committee feels that programs must be devised to enable food to be made available directly to particular groups, primarily children, senior citizens, shut-ins, and the destitute.

This is an exceedingly important recommendation. I believe this opinion is shared by all members of the Food Prices Committee.

May I say what we in this party believe that this recommendation entails? We believe that it entails the encouragement of provinces and municipalities to increase welfare payments by an amount necessary to augment food allowances to provide welfare recipients with an adequate diet and that notwithstanding the Canada Assistance Plan, the federal government would undertake to pay 100 per cent of the increase for this purpose. This is a subsidy to the low income consumer in particular which would match the subsidies which we have already outlined for the producers.

Second, this recommendation would aid volunteer organizations, such as missions, meals on wheels, senior citizens associations, and the like.