

The price of cauliflower

By Tony Pearson

This is part of a two part series; the second part will appear next week.

Food prices have been in the news lately, with the spotlight on such surprises as the \$8 cauliflower. Certainly in the past year, food prices have climbed at a greater rate than the rest of the Consumer Price Index ? about 4.5 per cent compared to one per cent. And because families buy food every week, they are very conscious when their food budget starts to escalate.

I must confess: food cost is not one of my areas of expertise. Like a lot of males, when I'm in a grocery store, I don't tend to notice prices. I buy what's on the list my wife has put together.

But if I can't quote the price of a litre of milk or a dozen eggs, I nonetheless know a couple of things about food. One central fact is that Canadians spend a lower percentage of their household income on food than just about any other country (the U.S., the British Isles, and Singapore excepted). The average household in Canada devotes about 10 per cent of its income to food, compared to almost half in Pakistan and Kenya, and a quarter to a third in nations as diverse as Russia, China, Mexico, and Turkey.

But within Canada, there are significant variances. The lower your income, the greater the portion you need to spend ? and the harder you are hit by price increases. This will be the subject of next week's article.

One other thing I do know: what we eat comes from farmers and fishermen. As the slogan has it, ?If you ate today, thank a farmer.? Many are within our own county. But others live thousands of kilometres away, in the U.S., Asia, South America and Africa. So although overall, most of our food dollar represents purchases from producers in Canada, still we import over 80 per cent of our fruits and vegetables, mostly from the States.

With so much imported food, its price depends to a great extent on the value of the Canadian dollar against the American. Our dollar now is low, largely because of falling oil prices. So we must spend more to buy the same amount of American lettuce. (Another strange situation: Maritime fishermen get more money if they sell their catches in the U.S. So Montreal seafood restaurants are buying PEI oysters from Boston.)

Then there's the effect of climate. Last year, California suffered a drought; this year, it had major flooding from El Nino. Each reduced supply, and as we know, scarcity drives up prices.

So if you want less expensive food, it's generally good advice to buy local and buy seasonal. To some extent, this takes us back to the pioneer days of our great grandfathers. In those days, most families ate root vegetables for much of the year ? turnips, carrots, potatoes. You couldn't get lettuce or tomatoes or celery in January; you could rarely get oranges at all.

But agricultural and transportation technology changed all that. And so did the gradual spread of agri-business. Now we expect all types of food year-round, and at low prices. Unfortunately, this might not be the way to food security.

Consider that the average age of a Canadian farmer is 54. Consider how many young people who grow up on farms leave them for easier and more lucrative careers elsewhere. Consider the debt load the average farmer is carrying. Is it then any wonder that family farms are being bought by agri-businesses?

Multi-national agri-businesses want economies of scale. One frequent result is a consolidation of food processing in their home plants. Accordingly, nearly 150 Canadian processing plants have been shut down in recent years. Think about Kellogg and Heinz ending decades-old Canadian plants. (For those old enough, remember Stompin' Tom's ?Ketchup Song? about Heinz's Leamington plant ? which is now closed.)

Thus, when new trade agreements, like the so-called Trans-Pacific Partnership, are proposed, it is of the greatest importance to ask: ?How will this affect Canadian farmers?? We can live without extended copyrights for recording artists, and we can live without more patent protection for American-owned drug manufacturers. But we can't afford to give up our dairy farmers. And we can't afford to have multi-nationals break down Canadian protections against ?Franken-food? by giving them free rein to import chemically-saturated dairy and chicken, to compete with more environmentally-friendly Canadian farmers.

For if the Canadian farmer can't make a decent living, food prices are sure to rise even more.

The Canadian and Ontario Federations of Agriculture collaborated on a framework document called ?Towards a National Food Strategy? which sets out nine objectives and encourages a debate on how to achieve them.

It's time for a national and provincial discussion on agricultural and food security policies and practices for the future. After all, as has been pointed out repeatedly, from time to time you may need a doctor or a lawyer or a police officer ? but two or three times a

day you definitely need a farmer. So we need to ask their opinion about what's needed. And we need to look at new ways of producing local crops. For more on this, see the article on Harvest House in this issue.

However, securing a future for the Canadian farmer is only part of the answer to bringing the cost of living under control for people in our area ? especially those with below-average incomes. For that, see next week's editorial comment. Stay tuned.