

Statistics to improve the collection of urgently needed statistical information on price movements.

(b) That more information concerning consumer prices be made available to the public in as simplified a form as possible.

(c) That a thorough review be made of the governmental system of collecting, analyzing and issuing other types of economic statistics in addition to price statistics.

4. Parliamentary Responsibility for Consumer Affairs

The experience in Canada and in many other western countries demonstrates the need for Parliament to be informed on both general and specific economic developments. Economics cannot properly be the exclusive province of experts, even though it has aspects which are technically complex. The study of particular legislation or special problems by ad hoc parliamentary committees does not meet the continuing need of Parliament to become familiar with the issues of current economic policy. For this reason, your committee has concluded that it would be desirable to establish a Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons whose primary aim would be to keep under continuous review the whole field of consumer affairs. In addition to this, the proposed committee should have the responsibility for surveying economic developments in the Canadian economy which affect employment, income and consumption levels. A Committee of Parliament would be immediately responsive to parliamentary or public concern over problems affecting the consumer.

It is recommended further that such a Joint Committee be established for the life of a parliament in order to provide continuity to its work and that it should act on problems referred to it by Parliament.

It is essential to provide the Joint Committee with the services of a professional staff. It is of interest to note that the Third Annual Review of the Economic Council makes a somewhat similar suggestion and outlines some specific tasks which a Joint Committee might undertake.

Recommendation:

That a Joint Committee be established to review consumer affairs and the state of the Canadian economy.

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5. The Influence of Consumer Demand on Food Prices

It was brought out in testimony before your committee that there is an increasing tendency for consumers to buy convenience foods. Such foods require a minimum of preparation before cooking and in some cases merely need to be thawed. In part, this is a consequence of increasing numbers of married women in the labour force and the unwillingness or inability of many consumers to devote much of their time to food preparation. Your committee has no views on the cultural aspects of this development but does recognize the fact that the price of convenience foods must inevitably include some allowance for the costs of preparation. If consumers prefer partially or completely prepared foods, they should be perfectly free to exercise their choice. However, if their time spent in the kitchen is reduced, it is to be expected that the cost of eating will be increased.

In the past few months, there has been widespread publicity and controversy concerning rising food costs. Public interest has been stimulated by the formation of consumer protest organizations, by the hearings before the Joint Committee on Consumer Credit and Cost of Living and by discussions in the press and on the radio and television. Your committee has gained the impression, based partly on the volume of its mail from the public, that consumers are looking at prices more carefully. There are quite acceptable substitutes for many types of food and consumers can affect the prices of particular items simply by not buying them if they think the price is excessive. It is also true that some consumers could reduce their food budgets by shopping carefully provided the retail food markets available to them are truly competitive. The conclusion of your committee is that if consumers are well informed and discriminating in their shopping practices they can reduce their food bill appreciably in many cases. Consumer education is a matter of such importance for the welfare of individuals and families that increasing attention should be devoted to it in the Canadian educational system beginning in the secondary schools. A vast amount of information useful to consumers is available through newspapers, magazines and the publications of government departments. Your committee's opinion is that increased efforts should be undertaken by the government departments involved to distribute as widely as possible attractive and informative material which will help the Canadian housewife to be a well-informed and careful shopper.