

Government Organization

and shall continue to recommend a prices and incomes review board which would be exposed to the full light of publicity. As the minister presently explains the function of the commission, this body too will undoubtedly engage in long-term, impersonal studies that will have little to do with the immediate problems of people. It, too, will be non-participatory as far as the consumer is concerned.

The proliferation of bureaucratic institutions which stand like a fence between the minister and consumers, coupled with the department's failure to give the public the chance to be heard, dooms the consumer branch to ineffectiveness. And this despite regional offices, which are all to the good and which I hope will knock down a few of the palings in the fence so that at least we can get the odd look at the minister and his department.

This fear of public exposure and review carries itself to the House of Commons. Why is there no standing committee of the house to review the estimates of the department? I address this question to the government house leader as well as to the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs. With all the other important departments having their standing committees, if the consumers of this country are also important why is there no standing committee of this house to review, in particular the estimates of the minister's department and to undertake special inquiries into consumer problems as they arise? I think this matter is very important and such a committee would at least permit some airing of these problems.

I realize the minister proposes that reports from the prices and incomes commission should be sent to a joint committee of the Senate and House of Commons. Why not send them to a committee that is directly responsible to the elected House of Commons?

In my opinion, business interests are already more than adequately represented in the other place. Let us not load such a committee with people who are not responsible in any way to the consumers. I think the House of Commons should have its own committee, instead of squeezing consumer affairs problems in with the already heavily taxed committee that considers the estimates of the department of health and welfare.

May I make one final point. The Combines Investigation Act needs to be overhauled so that it can become effective in protecting consumers. The hon. member for St. John's East

has already referred to the Batten report and the role that should be played by the combines investigation department. Last fall we had the Batten commission appealing to the combines branch to investigate directly grocery prices on the prairies. To date, we have been unable to get any information that indicates that the combines branch is doing anything to deal with this matter.

The hon. member for St. John's East mentioned the period of a few weeks, but it has been five months since the Batten report was tabled. This royal commission appointed by the prairie provinces appealed to this department for help in protecting consumers.

Questions I asked during the minister's estimates last fall elicited that the minister had, at least at that time, no intention of bringing down the kind of amendments that would enable the combines branch to carry on such an investigation. He said—

Mr. McGrath: Would the hon. lady permit a question in order that I can correct the record?

Mrs. MacInnis: I will if I can have a few seconds added on.

Mr. McGrath: I did not refer to the Batten report. I was referring to the Alberta royal commission report on gasoline marketing.

Mrs. MacInnis: I thought the hon. member was referring to grocery prices on the prairies as well.

Mr. McGrath: I did refer to those but not in the context of a few weeks; that was the Alberta report.

• (9:30 p.m.)

Mrs. MacInnis: I am glad to be corrected. Until we can get these amendments the Combines Investigation Act is of little use to the housewife who is held up for ransom every time she goes to the grocery store. That has been proven to the satisfaction of almost everyone on the prairies, although it may not have been proven to the satisfaction of the combines director. The situation is, I submit, that the combines director is not satisfied with the evidence. I say that he should be given teeth by our putting teeth into the Combines Investigation Act; that way he could make the necessary further investigations that will satisfy even him that grocery prices on the prairies are away up because of combinations in restraint of trade. Until such