

Government Organization

Mr. Douglas: I happen to know that I am right. I have a letter from the Prime Minister in which he states that the Economic Council of Canada is not making a study as to whether or not price increases are justified, and that their special reference does not cover such a study. The government should make up its mind as to where it is going. I do not know whether by moving far to the left the hon. member's lines of communication with the government have been cut off, but the information I have from the Prime Minister himself is to the effect that that is not the purpose of the study being made by the council.

I asked the Prime Minister a question on the orders of the day, and he wrote me a letter to make it clear that there was no study being made by the Economic Council as to whether or not price increases are justified or whether they are the result of excessive profiteering. What the government is doing in this regard, as in regard to everything else, is merely stalling, using another commission of inquiry or agency to put off the day of reckoning. The day of reckoning is getting closer every time another strike occurs or a labour dispute erupts. We are kept waiting for everything, just as we are kept waiting for the Secretary of State's white paper on broadcasting.

Miss LaMarsh: It is not June yet.

Mr. Douglas: The second excuse for not accepting the request made by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre relates to the legal aspects. There is no constitutional obstacle to the government's studying prices with a view to determining whether or not increases are justified. If the government were going to endeavour to roll back prices or control them, then concurrent legislation with the provinces would be required. However, to conduct a review of prices and price increases to see whether or not they are justified, and to make those who are increasing prices come before the bar of public opinion to justify their actions, does not require any power which the federal government does not possess.

The fact is that this government has been hiding behind the constitution for as long as I can remember. Whenever it does not want to do anything it finds a constitutional difficulty—the constitution always stands in the way of anything that needs to be done—except, of course, during election campaigns, at which

time the government is prepared to do everything. Whenever the government comes back and sits in this house, the good old constitution is trotted out again to provide an excuse for continuing the policy of inertia and inaction.

Finally the President of the Privy Council tells us not to be too disappointed about the fact that the government is not prepared to change clause 8 to give the new department wider powers to assist the consumers. He says there is a good deal of power and legislation which will give new administrative authority to this new department which will be of great benefit to the consumers.

The minister has referred to the anti-combines legislation. This legislation has been in existence for a long time, and for a long time it was under the jurisdiction of the minister who is now talking about it. Fairly soon it will probably come under his jurisdiction again. I should like to ask him how much good that has done the consumers over the last quarter of a century. The combines legislation has not helped the consumers. Investigations have been conducted into a score of commodities in respect of which the consumers of this country have been exploited, yet the consumers have not been protected. The minister tells us that we should be of good cheer because legislation will be forthcoming which will help the poor down-trodden consumers of this country. I say to him that if this legislation is not any better in the future than it has been in the past, heaven help the consumers. If the minister is not able to take any more aggressive action on the basis of this legislation over the next few years than has been the case in the past three years, the consumers are going to be no better off.

Mr. Chairman, the consumers of this country will not be fooled by the oral tributes which are being paid to the government today, nor by the lip service which is being foisted upon them. The consumers of this country want action, and all we are asking is that clause 8 be changed to give the minister some authority to do something for the them. We are not asking for legislation at this time, but simply that the minister be given authority when he takes office to do something under the provisions of whatever legislation the government will introduce. It is quite clear that the government is not prepared to take this simple but forward step. With friends like those in the government, the consumers do not need enemies.