

Proposed Consumers Affairs Department

I recognize that this will not be easy. I am aware that jurisdiction is divided between the federal government and the provinces. But I also know that the days when administrations could play football between provinces and the federal government as a means of doing nothing are gone. On a host of issues the urgency of the situation has compelled the federal government to go to the provinces and say: Here is the problem; how are we to share this responsibility and provide what is necessary by way of legislation? This could be done in connection with a department of consumer affairs.

I wish to draw my remarks to a close at this point because I want to leave time for further discussion. One hour is a very limited amount of time available on occasions such as this for discussion of a subject of such magnitude. Consumers are spending each year \$29 billion across this country, which is big business. Indeed, instead of asking only for one department of consumer affairs there should be a good deal more activity on the part of the government in connection with this matter.

I recognize that this resolution will go to the bottom of the list. But I urge that for a change it should not be forgotten. The kindest thing would be for the government, as it has done on so many other occasions, to steal this plank from our platform. We would love to have it stolen. If they would bring in a bill on these lines next year they would have our full support.

• (5:20 p.m.)

Mr. D. R. Tolmie (Welland): Mr. Speaker, I feel that all citizens realize the imperative need to protect the Canadian consumer, and government intervention on a federal and provincial level is absolutely necessary to achieve this end. It is a truism that government with its powers and resources to investigate, regulate and advise, with its legitimate concern for the welfare of our people, has enacted legislation to protect them in many spheres such as labour, pensions, transport and medicare. The realm of consumer protection is one which most certainly cannot be ignored and it should be obtaining increasing governmental attention. The quality and price of what we wear, what we eat, what we drink, all our material needs, are of prime concern to the federal government and rightly so.

The intent of the motion before the house is a most laudable one and the mover is to be congratulated for her concern about matters which affect the daily lives of our people.

[Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway).]

However, though not opposing the well-intentioned spirit of the motion may I say that I support the principle advocated but not the means spelled out in the wording of the motion. I do not feel the government—I emphasize “at this time”—is justified in setting up a complete department of consumers’ affairs and I oppose the proposal on a number of grounds.

There is a growing tendency to form departments for new areas of interest such as education, and at the present time the government is in the process of creating several new ministries. My opposition to the proposal arises because of my aversion to the compounding of bureaucracy. If a department were created, all the attendant expense of the creation of a new ministry and staff, though initially relatively modest, would follow the alarming habit of ballooning to a much greater degree than originally contemplated.

There is not only the expense involved and the draining of personnel from other departments. I feel there is a real and growing danger of an ever-increasing multiplicity of departments with ever-growing duplication and overlapping which militate against the efficient handling of the problems for which they were created. I submit that another cabinet post with all the necessary related machinery simply does not appear justified under the present circumstances.

Furthermore, the Consumers Association of Canada has done a great deal of good work. Through the imposition of grading systems and its testing procedure and in many other ways it has protected the consumer. With the formation of a federal department the completely detached work of this association might be impaired. One reason it has been so effective stems from the fact that it has operated independently of all external pressures.

The contemporary tendency is to impose ever-widening responsibilities upon government departments which in turn are more susceptible to lobbies and influences from without. There is no assurance that a government portfolio would strengthen the consumer association’s very important and valuable program which has contributed so much to the protection and welfare of Canadian citizens.

The argument against a separate department at this time does not mean that I feel no further action in regard to consumers’ affairs should be taken. Quite to the contrary. I submit there is a drastic need for a much