

Mr. Mark Rose (Fraser Valley West): Mr. Speaker, I have listened to a great part of this debate and have read the rest of it, and frankly I am beginning to wonder what the fuss is all about. Among the major protagonists we find the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Gray), whom I regard as the typical Canadian response to Ralph Nader, urging us to pass this omnibus bill to the committee with all possible dispatch. He regards the bill, obviously, as a substantial part of the government's plan to protect our inflation—ravaged consumers.

● (1610)

On the Conservative side, starring roles have been assigned to those staunch defenders of collective bargaining rights, the hon. member for St. Paul's (Mr. Atkey) and, of course, the hon. member for Trinity (Mr. Hellyer), who essentially say, "Let's go easy," "Why so fast?" or, "Don't hustle this bill into committee in unusual or unseemly haste".

I have heard them and others in that party insist that it is only fair and democratic to give Canada's consumers a chance to prepare briefs for committee presentation. Pity those poor consumers; they need time to prepare arguments, their voices are muted and they are under-financed. Few, if any, references have been made by the Conservative Party, the hon. member for St. Paul's, the hon. member for Trinity and the hon. member for York-Simcoe (Mr. Stevens), about the well-heeled Chamber of Commerce or the CMA's louder voices who will also want to jam the committee with representations to repeat their arguments for the third monotonous time.

As for my position, I honestly do not care much one way or the other. I think Bill C-7 is largely cosmetic or tokenistic. I do not believe that its passage will make very much difference in ensuring improved competition in Canada. And even if it does, I fail to be convinced that the resulting benefits of improved competition—if there are any—will be passed on to the Canadian public. Very impressive, I thought, was the admission of the hon. member for Trinity that in an oligopolistic industrial and commercial society, which is our present one, price leadership and other under-the-table deals were never made in written form. Usually, the hon. member reported, in such instances where price-fixing and combine arrangements were agreed to, they were made among the boys on the golf course, at lunch in the club or in some back room and sometimes hardly a word was spoken. I found that admission particularly revealing and I thought he displayed unusual frankness.

The hon. member for Bruce (Mr. Whicher) told us a moment ago that this legislation will do a great deal to protect us from being gouged by lawyers, doctors and glass companies. Under a situation where there is no cartel per se—that is, a formal one—and when only the informal one exists I do not see how this bill can protect us from unwritten professional tariffs.

Another impressive revelation on the subject of competition was made a couple of weeks ago by the Minister of Transport (Mr. Marchand) who in an equally rare moment of candour admitted that in terms of a Canadian transportation policy, at least, the policy of competition between carriers had been both ineffectual and costly. The whole

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policy appeared to him to be a blunder and we urgently need a new policy. Naturally, when two distinguished members of parliament representing the major political parties, such as on the one hand the hon. member for Trinity who tells us that in industry dominated by a few major firms competition does not occur, and the Minister of Transport who says that in transportation competition has not worked, how does a person's faith in competition remain firm?

I am at once impressed and distressed because both the major parties have been selling the Canadian public on the joys and benefits of competition for as long as I can remember. If competition does not work or does not happen, and when it does happen it does not work, what are we left to believe in? It is shattering, I think. It is like discovering for the first time that there is no Santa Claus.

This bill does little, if anything, to enhance fairness in the marketplace. This came through as the theme of the hon. member for St. Paul's: the bill's passage is not to the benefit or to the detriment of either business or the consumers. And at least that much was implied by the hon. member for Trinity who also said that he will vote for the bill eventually. If Bill C-7 is a "nothing" bill, what is the point of hanging around here for ever and ever debating second reading? I agree with the members of my party, the hon. member for Bruce and the minister who urged us to hurry passage of the bill to the committee for detailed examination. If we just want to hang it up, then that is political strategy in itself. All parties are guilty of that from time to time—

An hon. Member: Oh, oh!

Mr. Rose: —except, of course, the Conservative Party! I therefore opt for an early delivery of the bill to the committee so that this House can get down to more crucial matters.

Now, to heed my own advice, I should like to get down to discussion of some aspects of the bill. There are numerous details because this is an omnibus bill which covers a variety of subjects. However, I will limit myself. I should like to discuss only some of the aspects of the bill which I believe require elaboration and explanation. My first reference will be to section 7 on page 5, which requires six persons over the age of 18 to bring forth an application to the director before an inquiry can be launched on an alleged contravention of the Combines Investigation Act. Under paragraph (2) of that section, the rights of those six persons are further limited by requiring them to provide evidence and name names to support their request to the director.

I think the thrust of this section is all wrong. I think it is wrong to leave it up to citizens to prod a possibly reluctant director into action. I think its further limitation is in the evidence-gathering provision, because all of us know that the evidence-gathering abilities and powers of citizen groups or even, as the hon. member for York-Simcoe pointed out, small business groups is quite limited and, in addition, evidence-gathering can be costly. At the moment the director is free to respond or not and to remain in his customary comatose posture.

What we need in this country, and what we want is a self-starting, vigorous ongoing monitoring by the commis-