

*Government Organization*

businessmen, the producers. He himself recognized the contradiction inherent in this position when he spoke on December 9 and told us it was no secret that consumer interests and producer interests were often in conflict. Nevertheless, he continues to try to make these conflicting interests work in double harness. I do not think it can be done well within the same department. He said he was striving to obtain for all citizens just and fair economic treatment whether they were concerned with the supply side or on the consumer side of the market, whether they be consumers, investors or businessmen.

● (9:20 p.m.)

The truth is that when they are talking to their business friends, the minister and his officials keep explaining away their responsibilities to consumers. I see the minister smiling but just let him wait. Let me again quote Gordon Osbaldeston, the deputy minister of consumer affairs, who by the way has had a long career in the public service looking after not the interests of consumers but the interests of the Canadian business community in the Department of Trade and Commerce. In my view this is not an ideal apprenticeship for looking after the interests of consumers. From a recent speech in which he said that free enterprise was the goal of the department, I quote:

We want businessmen to know what we are all about. That's why we start from the premise of free enterprise, and work from there.

This leads me to inquire: What is the purpose of the department? Is it to satisfy businessmen and the free enterprise system? Is it to protect the consumer? Or is it to give each one the idea that the department is on its side at one and the same time? Mr. Osbaldeston's view makes it clear that, in his opinion at least, the interests of business come first. And Mr. Osbaldeston is deputy minister of the consumer affairs branch, the official who is supposed to speak for the interests of consumers.

From the beginning the minister has insisted that, and again I use his own words:

A knowledgeable customer is no threat to the honest businessman and certainly no threat to the market place.

Surely, it is not the qualities of customers that threaten the marketplace; rather it is the inherent qualities of uncontrolled free enterprise. The minister is keen on consumer education to deal with this, but education is a two-way process. It is not just a question of informing the consumers how to be more

[Mrs. MacInnis (Vancouver-Kingsway).]

careful shoppers; it is also a question of giving the consumers the chance to let the department know what they want and where they need protection.

The department has so far set up two new pieces of machinery that are supposed to carry out the function of protecting consumers. These are Box 99, the complaints department, and the consumer advisory council. But characteristically, the approach of both is impersonal.

As far as Box 99 is concerned, people can write to it if they know about it. Here, I give the department credit for taking steps to make it known. Possibly some time later on a letter will be received from the company that caused the particular problem, but what chance does one get personally and publicly to discuss one's problem? Who knows about it? Does the department publicize the names of the companies that are taking unfair advantage of consumers? What measures are taken to protect other consumers from the same abuses by the same companies?

These are questions that I have had asked me by many correspondents who, as consumers, have had difficulties. The truth is, I believe, that the department of consumer affairs is not prepared to name names or even to provide an agency that will do so. It is simply too much interested in its heartfelt responsibilities to the business community to become effective in carrying out its overriding responsibilities to consumers.

The second piece of machinery is the consumers advisory council, which according to its chairman ought not to look after short-term, specific problems. Dr. Leighton has said:

It seems much less productive to me for the council to tackle highly topical questions, such as popsicles, than to study long-term problems.

Who, then, will study these tough, short-term problems? Such specific problems—including popsicles—are the very problems that the consumer has to face day after day.

The consumers advisory council would, in my opinion, be well advised to hold its meetings not always in Ottawa but at various points across Canada, including at each meeting at least one session that is open to the public and at which consumers can make themselves heard. This would put real meaning into the term "participatory democracy". Failure to do this is to substitute verbiage for the real thing.

Another piece of machinery that the minister envisions is a prices and incomes commission. We, in this party, have recommended