

Corporate and Consumer Affairs

Above all, it said that a department would clearly assign responsibility to a minister and to a minister's staff to do all in their power to improve the lot of the Canadian consumer. So that this bill, in extending the authority of the Department of the Registrar General and converting it into a department of corporate and consumer affairs, establishes ministerial responsibility, ministerial authority for the consumer.

Mr. Nielsen: Mr. Speaker, would the minister permit another question?

Mr. Turner: Mr. Speaker, I enjoy the clash of debate with the hon. member, but I dealt with his last point. I will listen very carefully when the hon. member engages in rebuttal. I want to apologize to him and the house for taking very little time in introducing the resolution, so little time in fact that the hon. member criticized me for it. Because of the importance of this issue, I think I should now be allowed to explain this matter at a little more length.

Mr. Nielsen: Take all the time you want.

Mr. Turner: I express my thanks to the hon. member. The committee did not believe it was in a position to make specific recommendations concerning the way in which the department of consumer affairs should be organized, but it did suggest that the components of the department should have three principal functions or aims: (a) consumer standards, (b) consumer protection, and (c) consumer information.

● (9:30 p.m.)

The joint committee made another important comment. It said that the view was sometimes expressed that price control by government edict is the easy answer to price stability. All the witnesses who were questioned on this matter disagreed with that opinion and, in the opinion of the committee, those witnesses demonstrated clearly that this was an unworkable and unrealistic solution. The joint committee noted, furthermore, that the federal government does not have the constitutional power to enter this field.

The hon. member for Vancouver-Kingsway (Mrs. MacInnis) in the debate last Friday at the resolution stage seemed to look upon the new department as a reincarnation of the wartime price control board. It follows from what I have said and from the judgment made by the joint committee that there is no intention that this department should act as a sort of controller, and I reiterate that not only

[Mr. Turner.]

does this parliament or this government not have the constitutional authority for such a role but I tend to be convinced that attempts in peacetime to regulate prices by law would shortly prove to be unworkable and inconsistent with the operation of a market economy.

The joint committee reached one additional conclusion which I think was of some considerable interest. It said that the study of particular legislation or special problems by ad hoc parliamentary committees does not meet the continuing need of parliament to become familiar with the issues of current economic policy.

For this reason the committee concluded that it would be desirable to establish a joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons whose primary aim would be to keep up a continuous review of the whole field of consumer affairs. In addition, the suggested committee should have the responsibility for surveying economic developments in the Canadian economy which affect employment, income and consumption levels. The committee said that such a committee of parliament would be immediately responsive to parliamentary or public concern over problems affecting the consumer.

Without accepting the entire terms of reference which the joint committee gave to itself, in principle I welcome the proposal and I do so particularly because of the support and guidance that such a continuing parliamentary committee might afford in the effective administration of the legislation for which my department will be responsible. I happen to believe that the role of an individual member of parliament can be enhanced by the expansion of the committee system whereby information articulated by the permanent service or by experts within or without the service can be brought before parliamentary scrutiny for proper review. I notice the hon. member is smiling. I want to say that the essence upon which this bill is founded has already received that type of parliamentary scrutiny, but the whole matter of consumer affairs might well be subjected to that type of scrutiny on a continuing basis because I also believe that public debate, of which we have not had too much in a clear and open fashion in this country, is a good continuing process.

Mr. Nielsen: The bill has not received that type of scrutiny.

Mr. Turner: The bill is a product of recommendations not only of a parliamentary committee but also of the Economic Council of