

Gasoline Labelling

We must always have a trade-off; we must look at the consumer interest in the light of reality. In this particular case we feel that there are other areas of activity that are of greater priority to consumers than the one with which we are dealing tonight. So I suggest that although the bill is founded on a perfectly valid observation and a real genuine concern for adequate disclosure to consumers, there is insufficient information available to our department to indicate that it is of such a great priority that it should be put ahead of other things. It must be pointed out that there is a considerable dearth of real information and research on the subject, and there is also a considerable question as to the constitutional jurisdiction in respect of this type of regulation.

Mr. A. C. Abbott (Mississauga): Madam Speaker, I rise on Bill C-217 presented by the hon. member for Ottawa West (Mr. Francis), recognizing, as did the hon. member for Ontario (Mr. Cafik), that the bill is inspired by the highest possible motive to protect motorists from exploitation by gasoline companies which are misleading their customers, or by automobile gasoline dealers who are not living up to the standards laid down by the gasoline companies.

Unlike the hon. member for Ontario I am not an expert on the subject of octane content and I was struck, as was everyone, by the hon. member's remarkable grasp of the problems, and the way he illustrated to us in such fulsome detail the number of dealers and the cost for analysing each and every sample of gasoline. It was a remarkable performance. His ability to link the question of the octane of fuel with quotations from G. K. Chesterton was indeed to be admired. It was a high octane performance.

However, we must be struck by the fact that, desirable as certain protective devices may be, the price we pay exceeds the protection afforded. I notice that the hon. member for Ottawa West derived great comfort and assurance as he motored through New Brunswick in 1970, savouring each opportunity when he filled his car with gasoline from seeing the information as to the octane content of the gas legibly displayed. Nonetheless, I am advised, partly by the hon. member for Ontario who supplied me with some information from his enormous sources, that in 1966 the requirement in New Brunswick for declaring the octane rating was deleted. The only assumption then is that the gasoline dealers in New Brunswick who ignored the fact that the requirement of the law was no longer in effect continued to provide visitors, such as the hon. member for Ottawa West, with the information which he so greatly desired.

The important thing in considering this measure is not simply the cost ultimately to be borne by the consumer but the value of such information. Recently we have had a tremendous variety of government regulations and requirements for industry and business to provide the consumer with better information. This in itself is a desirable thing, but I would like to cite an example which is perhaps analogous to the suggestion made today by the hon. member, namely, that the Textile Labelling Act, which is an act of the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, required that every garment made in Canada should carry a description of its fibre content—what percentage of cotton, polyester, or other fibre it

[Mr. Cafik.]

contains, in both official languages. On the face of it this is a very necessary piece of information, but the fact remains that for the average Canadian purchaser this sort of information is almost worthless without information being provided on how the garment should be cleaned or laundered in order for the best use to be made of the particular fabric, particularly for reasons of durability.

The departmental officials decided, in their great wisdom, to lift almost the whole requirement from U.S. regulations, except that they made a single amendment. They pointed out that rather than simply having the vendor of textile fabrics provide a description of the fibres contained in a particular garment, the requirement would be that the garment survive ten washings, which meant that a permanent label had to be attached to it with what, to the average consumer, was almost irrelevant information, whereas the department failed to provide consumers with care labelling, which is what they really need.

I hope, Madam Speaker, you will not think I wandered too far from the subject but I will return to the matter before us when I suggest that the same problem exists in requiring an octane rating to be displayed on the gasoline pump. The average motorist does not know the first thing about octane and he has no desire to know what it means. I think that almost certainly he would prefer the kind of standard set out in the United States, that is, octane rating specifications which simply describe a list of grades which he can select and which are recommended in the manual appropriate to his particular car. This is a far better method because of the technical problems that occur in making a simple declaration as to the octane rating, particularly when you consider that a certain car may be eight years old and have 150,000 miles on it, and it serves no purpose whatever for the owner of the car to expect the same performance from that car when he fills it with a certain high octane gasoline as he would from another car.

Mr. Lloyd Francis (Ottawa West): May I ask the hon. member a question?

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Morin): Would the hon. member for Mississauga (Mr. Abbott) permit a question?

Mr. Abbott: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Francis: The hon. member just said that this is of no value to the consumer. Is it not conceivable that the owner of a car might not be able to observe the performance of that car with variations in altitude or in temperature, and purchase an appropriate octane rating of gasoline? Is this not quite a reasonable thing for owners of cars to do?

Mr. Abbott: Madam Speaker, I think that what the hon. member is asking is that the information be displayed by a gasoline company, whether it be in numbers, which are incomprehensible, or in words with which the motorist can identify. I suggest that this information in numbers is obscure and that it should be stated in words that this is premium gasoline, gasoline of second grade, or whatever, so that the motorist knows what he is buying. If a No. 3 gas is provided to him when he thought he was buying a No. 1 premium grade, he can then utilize the misleading advertising provisions in the present Combines Investigation Act.