

introduced such a bill in the House. I think this legislation is long overdue. It is essential that it be given swift consideration and passage by hon. members, for it is greatly needed. Its goals are very simple. What we are trying to achieve by amending this act is firstly to encourage fair competition between companies and, secondly, to give consumers better protection against reprehensible trade practices. In fact, Mr. Speaker, those amendments to the restrictive trade practices legislation have already passed the first and second reading stage in the last session.

Since I have reintroduced this bill without any new amendment last Wednesday, I hope hon. members will co-operate and give this bill second reading as soon as possible so it may be referred to committee.

I have already announced, and I say it again to the House, that it is my intention to introduce as soon as possible at the committee stage important amendments that will further clarify the scope of the bill. I think that several briefs were submitted to the parliamentary committee during the last session. Those were useful briefs that will be considered, but I want to say again and again very clearly that some action is required in this area, for the Canadian public is increasingly suspicious, for good reason perhaps, of the mechanics of competition in this economic world where big corporations sometimes get, in the mind of the public, too big a piece of the cake.

And I think that if nothing is done, we may slowly lose our free enterprise system as we know it, through our own inaction, because the public will expect more direct action from governments. When seen in its true light, the right of competition therefore is not government intervention in the field of industry and business but rather a safeguard against such action.

Mr. Speaker, while I must insist on the importance of bringing the legislation on competition up to date, I would not want to leave the impression that this act is now being administered inefficiently. We know that the director, under the law, must initiate inquiries when he has reason to believe that the law has been broken. Few of these inquiries are known to the public, because their confidential nature must be ensured. In a way, I regret it because the public would be able to see that in the Consumer and Corporate Affairs Department there are people working to protect their interests.

Without giving too many details on these inquiries, I can assure the House that many investigations are now under way and we are doing our best so that the Combines Investigation Act is respected. Some investigations, of course, are a better known to the public because there have been leaks and we are already in court. I am thinking of the investigations concerning oil and sugar. Mr. Speaker, three big sugar refineries were brought to court having been accused of conspiring to fix the price of sugar and to prevent free competition in this area. This case is now before the courts and, therefore, I cannot say much more about it. I regret it as there is much I would like to say. I think it essential that the investigation process, followed by the legal process, follow its course in Canada. If I have a wish, it is this one; that judges be more conscious of the importance, when it is appropriate and necessary, of handing down even stiffer sentences than in the past. I am

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happy that in many cases the judges have imposed exemplary fines.

In too many cases, however, the fines imposed were unfortunately not those I would have handed down had I been the judge. And I will go even further. In some cases in the United States, the courts did not hesitate to jail the directors or executives of some companies. If there are cases now in Canada which justify such sentences, I trust the authorities will have the courage to send to prison those who deserve it. I should like to deal briefly with some of the measures I intend to introduce to the House in the next few weeks, measures designed to ensure the consumer greater protection and more information. I intend to take several new steps in the field of consumer credit. I shall bring before the House a bill to amend section 6 of the Interest Act with a view to forcing lenders to specify clearly their true rate of interest and imposing a uniform base for the calculation of interest rates.

Secondly, still in the field of consumer credit, I intend to bring forward soon a bill to amend the Small Loans Act. Thirdly, I am contemplating a complete revision of the Interest Act, especially with a view to ensuring a uniform method of disclosure applicable to all lenders for the protection of borrowers.

I think it is essential that Canadians become more and more aware of my department as a useful instrument of protection and information to the consumer. To this end, we have set up regional offices in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. We also have district offices and we intend to open more in order to better serve the Canadian consumers. We shall also open several consumer storefront offices providing various community services especially to underprivileged consumers, such as low-income families, older people or new immigrants.

I think it is essential that we go ahead in this field to open about twenty of those consumer information services across the country during the present fiscal year. And that work will be done in co-operation with voluntary organizations that already exist in several cities in Canada.

Of course there will be budgetary limitations but as we will try to expand and improve our services as much as possible so they will be available to the consumers in the various areas of Canada.

Finally, non-profitable organizations, community services certainly already play an important role that we want to support. My department will try and give as many grants as possible to encourage them to continue to play their role to provide better protection for the consumer.

Time is running and I will soon have to conclude my remarks. I would also like to talk about an extremely important organization which has made the headlines in recent weeks, the Food Prices Review Board and its role.

However important all the steps I mentioned earlier to protect and inform consumers, as well as the instruments available to me to fulfill adequately my task as minister, I am fully aware that although I am well supported by the Canadian Consumer Council, the Consumer Research Council, voluntary groups, or the many pieces of legislation we intend to introduce in this House, a basic fact remains—Canadians are still greatly concerned about the question of price increases.