

*Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act*

Bill C-280, introduced by my hon. friend, the Hon. Member for Ottawa—Vanier (Mr. Gauthier), purports to help consumers by transferring the requirements for the bilingual labelling of consumer products into the Act itself, rather than leaving them enshrined as regulations under the Act. It was I who interrupted his speech by saying "*C'est n'est pas vrai*" because what he was saying was not true. I hope I can convince him that the free trade agreement in no way will jeopardize our high Canadian standards for consumer information and protection.

Presently, we have free trade in about 80 per cent of the products in which we deal with the United States. The Hon. Member raises the fear that the Americans will come here and insist upon unilingual packaging. I assume they would have done that long before now.

The needs of bilingual labelling are already being fulfilled on a uniform basis across Canada by regulations under the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act. These regulations have the full force of the law.

Both I and the Government fully support current statutory and regulatory requirements for bilingual labelling of consumer products. The changes proposed in Bill C-280 are purely cosmetic and totally unnecessary.

Let me point out why. I believe the Hon. Member admitted today that the Government has a full, firm and unwavering commitment to bilingualism. It has made public statements regarding free trade and its impact on bilingual labelling. There is a self-evident lack of any rationale whatsoever for change. As well, the present regulatory structure has been operating for almost 20 years, with no operational failures or glitches.

The Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (Mr. Andre) recently released an assessment of the effect of the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement on Canadian consumers. This assessment is a sound, objective and scholarly study of free trade's impact on consumers. I want to congratulate the Minister and his department for producing this information.

This assessment addressed the specific question of the potential impact of the free trade agreement on Canadian technical standards for consumer information and protection. It noted that the free trade agreement will benefit consumers by allowing for increased consumer access to imports, where technical standards unnecessarily restrict U.S. imports. In this way, the provisions of the agreement concerning technical standards ensure that consumers will realize the potential benefits from the elimination of customs tariffs.

Canadian consumers will receive the benefit of greater access to U.S. products, and at the same time under the agreement, in the words of the assessment: "Consumer information and protection is accepted as a legitimate reason to maintain technical standards. Thus, Canada's consumer information and protection legislative provisions will remain in place to protect consumers".

Canada's standards for consumer protection and information, including requirements for bilingual labelling, are among the highest in the world. This Government intends to see that they stay that way. This is not just in the area of bilingual labelling, but across the full spectrum of consumer protection and information.

For example, under the free trade agreement, bilingual labelling, as required by Canadian law, is not affected. The Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act will continue to ensure that Canadians can determine whether a product is of Canadian or U.S. origin. Canadian health and safety symbols such as the hazardous product symbols will not be affected. Canadian safety standards that exceed those in the United States, such as our crib standards, will not be relaxed.

In short, the position of the Canadian consumer after free trade comes into effect can be summed up quite simply: under the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement, Canadian consumers will be safeguarded by standards that are equal to or higher than those they enjoy now.

If the Hon. Member who introduced Bill C-280 were really serious about safeguarding the interests of the Canadian consumer, I believe he would be supporting the free trade agreement rather than opposing it.

When the agreement is fully implemented in January, 1998, Canadian consumers will reap a number of important benefits. A number of consumer gains can be expected when customs tariffs which we are currently paying on U.S. goods are completely eliminated, as they will be under the agreement. The cost of living of low income families will decline by 3 per cent, or about \$325 a year. The cost of living for middle and high income families will decline by 2 per cent, or about \$800 a year. The average family of four will save between \$85 and \$130 annually on food expenditures. The increased competition from imports will improve the price, quality and variety of all consumer products, including those produced in Canada.

As these facts and figures indicate, Canadian consumers will benefit tremendously from free trade, while high Canadian technical standards designed to protect the consumers' interest, including our bilingual labelling requirements, are maintained.

There is no need to amend the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act. Under the regulations we have now, Canadian consumers are provided with bilingual labelling. This Government does not intend to tamper with success. For example, since I am working on my French, this weekend I assembled a wardrobe according to the French instructions. Those requirements for bilingual labelling will be maintained. This success has continued for 20 years. Our Government guarantees that Canadian consumers will continue to have the bilingual labelling information they need, and to which they have every right.

Bill C-280 will not improve the access that Canadians have to bilingual labelling under this Government. In fact, it may