

*Food Prices*

It should, however, be noted that the power of the large corporate chains increased substantially in the western provinces between 1958 and 1968. The grocery business in the rapidly developing shopping centres is largely in the hands of a few corporate chains. Also, a few chains have a disturbingly large share of the market in some cities. In addition, there remains a great deal to be learned about food distribution, especially at the wholesaling level. It is the intention of the Director of Investigation and Research to keep the situation under active review.

That is the statement that the committee relied on. Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that the minister was not keeping on top of the thing. In his absence I might ask, what are they doing over there in the Combines Investigation Branch? Are they really having a look at the food industry at all?

Then there was recommendation No. 3 in the second report. That dealt with certain types of retail agreements involving cash discounts, volume discounts, co-operative advertising, end-aisle displays, introductory free goods and case allowances. The committee asked whether these types of agreements in any way reflected adversely on retail prices, whether they helped limit competition, and whether they disadvantaged small retailers and wholesalers.

Again, for the first time committee members learned in the House today that the minister has launched an investigation, or at least that he had the Combines Investigation Branch commence an investigation in July. That investigation was purportedly launched at the same time that the committee members were considering this recommendation and were trying to come to grips with what they saw as a very real problem. I think the minister was less than honest in not revealing to the committee that this investigation was taking place.

Not only is the minister failing to co-operate with the Food Prices Review Board in their attempt to get investigative staff, but he is failing to co-operate with the special committee. Knowing full well that they were considering a matter in the committee, he chose not to reveal to them the fact that the branch over which he has responsibility was doing the sort of thing the committee members were concerned about. Again, I think that is despicable.

Recommendation No. 2 in the first report of the committee dealt with the consumer protection provisions of the proposed Competition Act. The committee asked the minister to hive off those protection provisions and enact them immediately without waiting for the other provisions dealing with monopoly power, mergers and related items.

The minister, while he has made noises about bringing in provisions relating to misleading advertising or dealing with consumer protection, has yet to give a firm indication of placing on the order paper a bill dealing with consumer protection. Indeed the government House leader was unwilling to give a commitment that we would have the misleading advertising provisions presented prior to any planned recess to come within one, two or three weeks. Again, I say it is very difficult for members of the House and members of the committee to take the minister at his word in view of the many promises that have been broken time and time again.

Those are four areas where the minister has failed to implement the recommendations that have been placed before him in good faith by members of the committee. There are several others. I mention them only in passing. The first is that he should have implemented a program to provide food for low-income Canadians. No such program has been placed before the House. We have no real legislation in force requiring nutritional information on food products. We have no action to ensure that food advertising is primarily price and quality informative, and we have no action to encourage consumers to buy private brands that offer them significant savings.

The Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs has now been in office for some ten months. I suppose that it is fair to give a minister in a new portfolio a chance to get a grip on his department, to get to know the nature and scope of his responsibilities and to have time to formulate an approach to a legislative program that will be responsive to the needs of Canadians. And during that time I suppose it would be unfair of opposition members to criticize him unduly for inaction when the problems may have been those of a previous minister in that portfolio.

But, Mr. Speaker, that period of grace has passed. This minister is now fair game. He has been in office for ten months. He has had two reports from the special committee. He has had the first of the Food Prices Review Board. A total of ten substantive recommendations of a committee of this House were directed to him, and his present batting average is only 200. The Consumers Association of Canada continues to criticize him for his failure to bring in any effective competition legislation. The Consumers Council of Canada continues to berate him for failing to proclaim the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act.

It is time for this minister to consider doing something else if he is not going to produce in this portfolio. It does not bother me that the minister is lack-lustre, as he has been described, or as the leader of the NDP suggested facetiously on September 4 as "vital, invigorating and dynamic". Those are mere personality traits. Personally, I find the minister a likeable chap.

But his record is abominable. Not only has he failed to achieve any substantive reforms in his portfolio but, equally important, he has failed to project the crusading image that Canadian consumers have a right to expect in their Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs.

Times are tough. Maybe this minister cannot come up with all the solutions to rising prices. But he can try to give the impression that he is trying and that he cares, that he shares the concern of millions of Canadians about shocking increases in the cost of living, particularly in the price of food. I put that forward in all seriousness in this debate. Previous ministers of consumer affairs have all had that crusading image. I refer to the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) who was the first holder of that portfolio, to the Minister of State for Urban Affairs (Mr. Basford) and to the Minister of Manpower and Immigration (Mr. Andras). To a large extent they all carried forward that crusading image. But we do not have it now at a time when there are shocking increases in the price of food, in the consumer price index and in the over-all cost of living. At a time when we have a 3.2 per cent monthly increase in the price of food we have a minister who does