

Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act

now acts and should remove sources of consumer confusion and discontent, thereby making consumer actions in the marketplace less difficult.

If we can go back in history, we see that people have been concerned for a long time about the weight of things and the measure of things. Consumers have wanted correct information about the products they have bought. I know, Mr. Speaker, that hon. members of this House are all biblical scholars. I would quote, for example, from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 25, verse 15:

• (9:40 p.m.)

But thou shalt have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure shalt thou have: that thy days may be lengthened in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

Mr. McGrath: Amen.

Mr. Basford: I also quote from the book of Proverbs, chapter 20, verse 23:

Divers weights are an abomination unto the Lord: and a false balance is not good.

Mr. McGrath: Hallelujah.

Mr. Bell: Is that from the old testament?

Mr. Dinsdale: That is the King James version.

Mr. Basford: We see, in more recent days than biblical times, references to the subject. For example, I quote article 35 of Magna Carta:

Mr. Dinsdale: We are really for it now.

Mr. Basford: It says:

There shall be standard measures of wine, ale and corn... throughout the kingdom.

Mr. McGrath: Hear, hear!

Mr. Dinsdale: We are getting lots of corn.

Mr. Bell: Explain.

Mr. Basford: It goes on to say:

There shall also be a standard width of dyed cloth, russett, and haberject, namely two ells within the selvedges. Weights are to be standardized similarly.

I have quoted these extracts, Mr. Speaker, to show that throughout all history people, whether they were biblical consumers or consumers in the reign of King John, have been anxious and concerned about weights, measures, proper labelling and proper information about products available to the consumer. This evening I am putting before the House a modern consumers' Magna Carta by which consumers will be entitled, once this bill is passed, to full, accurate and complete information about the consumer products they buy.

An hon. Member: But you can't smell a package.

[Mr. Basford.]

Mr. Basford: As hon. members know, there has been in recent years a rapid change in packaging and merchandising methods used in modern business. There has also been an equally rapid increase in the number of pre-packaged items appearing on the market. The trend has been to the supermarket type of operation, not only in the food field but in many of the retailing fields. While this bill refers to many things other than food, it is illuminating, I think, for us to know that in a modern supermarket there are approximately 7,000 different pre-packaged items. Estimates says that in four years there will be between 15,000 and 20,000 different items in this category.

One only has to go into a modern department store to realize what a huge array of consumer products the consumer is faced with. One result of this development has been that the package has replaced, to a great extent, the live salesman. The consumer must now rely on the package to give him the basic product information he once received from the merchant. In days gone past we knew the corner grocer or butcher; we went down to him and discussed the products that we wanted to buy. That is not the case now. Modern packaging has revolutionized retailing methods and has contributed significantly to the cleanliness, appearance and convenience of many consumer goods.

An hon. Member: Without profit to the consumer.

Mr. Basford: Undoubtedly there have been improvements and consumers have derived some advantages from this development. Nevertheless, despite those obvious advantages there has been a considerable measure of consumer discontent about packaging practices. For one thing, packaging often conceals some essential qualities of the goods and makes consumers dependent upon labels for information about what they are buying. You cannot taste boxes. You cannot see, taste, feel and smell the product when it is sold in tins, cardboard boxes, wrapping-paper or plastic. Actually there may not be anyone in the store who can tell you the qualities of the product.

The situation is not the same for all classes of products. For some, particularly for pre-packaged food and drugs, the labelling requirements are fairly comprehensive under existing, modern food and drug laws in this country. Although these laws are good, there is a variation in requirements as between one class and another and I suggest that is a source of concern both to producers and consumers. For others, labelling requirements are minimal or even non-existent. The result is that the consumer is often misguided and confused, and perhaps even deceived, by a vast array of poorly labelled items which makes a rational purchasing decision virtually an impossibility. There is therefore, in my view, a serious need to fill the large legislative vacuum which now exists in many areas and to bring some uniformity and coherence into those areas where there is now a bewildering variety of labelling requirements.

This may be regarded as the prime objective of this bill. It is designed as a comprehensive labelling and packaging bill of general application and is to apply to