

The question of consumer affairs is one that has interested me as a member of the committee on consumer credit. The first bill which I introduced in this house as a private member on the other side was with regard to the unconscionable transactions relief act.

I should like to put forward several observations, first about the remarks of the hon. lady regarding the establishment of a department of consumer affairs and at the same time to refer to a brief which was presented by the Consumers Association of Canada on April 12, 1966.

The hon. lady stated at one stage that there was not one single department devoted to consumer affairs in Canada. She thereafter, in part, denied her own observation by making the point that there were actually a great many different federal departments and laws concerned with consumer matters. She gave a partial enumeration of them and perhaps I can carry on the enumeration. There are the fair trading provisions as well as the monopoly provisions under the Combines Investigation Act. There is a false advertising section under the Criminal Code. There is, of course, a food and drug directorate, to which she made reference. There are Canada grade standards regulations maintained by the Department of Agriculture and, as the hon. lady stated, there is a Weights and Measures Act under the jurisdiction of and exercised by the Department of Trade and Commerce. There is, of course, legislation with regard to consumer lending and, more particularly, interest. I refer to the Interest Act in so far as it does provide protection, and the more comprehensive piece of legislative machinery, the Small Loans Act, both of which are administered by the Minister of Finance through the office of the Superintendent of Insurance.

I should acknowledge at once that there is great appeal to the argument that one should consolidate all these fairly diverse activities under one department, but I submit that while this argument does have appeal it makes more sense to continue to have particular functions carried out by the departments which have the expertise to deal with them. For example, under the Department of National Health and Welfare there is already assembled a body of expertise, comprising a groups of experts for the purpose of advising the government on health security measures. To move at least part of that group to a separate department of consumer affairs

*Proposed Consumers Affairs Department*

could only involve in the long run, duplication of responsibilities in the two departments of government. This would happen in the same way with reference to the Combines Investigation Act if responsibility for it was given to such a department although this perhaps was not suggested by the hon. lady but rather by the consumers association. I would point out that fair trade practices legislation is not just related to consumers but also to other interests in the country such as retailers who may be in competition in the market with individuals who are engaged in unfair trading practices. It is of interest to other manufacturers who may be concerned about monopolistic or combines situations involving their competitors. And it is of general public interest that there be full competition between firms operating in Canada so as to reduce the Canadian cost of manufacturers products, placing them in a competitive position on foreign markets. In other words, there is real merit to making sure that the particular function of expertise should be kept in one place and that the broad area of responsibility should concern itself not just with consumer interests but with all interests at other levels of the economy and with persons other than in their capacity as consumers.

● (5:40 p.m.)

In the same way, with regard to the Canada grade standards regulations which are administered by the Department of Agriculture I think we should bear in mind that while the grade standards regulations do have the effect of benefiting consumers in the availability of better quality products, their initial purpose was not to benefit the consumer but rather to benefit the producer in stimulating the production of better quality products and thus maximizing returns to individual producers. Therefore my first argument against the particular modus which the hon. lady has put forward is that you would be taking from individual government departments at least some of the expert advice they have available and which inevitably they would have to replace. Also, as the hon. member for Welland (Mr. Tolmie) pointed out, what we would really be doing would be duplicating the bureaucracy. I think it is clear on the basis of past experience that problems do arise in this regard. There would be a conflict of jurisdiction as to the particular problem, whether it be a consumer problem or one, for example, concerning fair practices at the manufacturing level.