

*Combines Investigation Act*

increased earlier this year, and the unnecessary excise and other special taxes they put on. That would be one way to reduce prices and to satisfy the public very quickly and very easily. But that was not done. However, in this case, in the end it would be the consumer who would suffer; because after all the consumer is not only a person who goes about looking for things he may buy cheaply; he is a person who wants to be able to get something he needs at a place he can reach within a reasonable time, when he needs it. He wants some local merchant within easy range who can afford to carry sufficiently varied lines so that the requirements of the ordinary community in the country, anywhere from the Atlantic to the Pacific, can be met by the inventory on hand. Therefore it is the consumer, the ordinary consumer, the purchaser, who is greatly interested in the merchant being able to maintain that line of credit which will permit him to operate.

But what happens if he is not able to operate? We all know what happens. It was the hon. member for York South who pointed out what would happen. The larger business would be able to gobble up the smaller ones. This bill would assist monopoly, as this government has assisted monopoly over and over again. If ever there was a government that has advanced and created monopoly it is the government now in power.

This would simply be one further step to create and extend vast monopolies. There is no one who has had practical experience in matters of this kind who does not know that there are many ways in which it would be possible to organize business in a manner that would make the enforcement of this measure very difficult. The simplest device would be for great drug-trading organizations, for instance, to buy out small merchants, or to buy part interests in those stores, and in this way create huge monopolies where there would be no question of price-fixing, because it would be one organization establishing its own prices.

I am surprised that members of the C.C.F. have displayed so little awareness of this very real danger which would be created by the measure before us. That is a danger—and I might suggest that the hon. member for York South pointed it out very clearly.

Of course in fairness to him I must say he made the reservation that there should be adequate safeguards. However, I am pointing out that the only safeguard that exists has never been used. It has got pretty rusty after all these years it has been lying unused, during which it has not been employed by this government.

When we talk about the manufacturer, let us remember that in every one of the lines we have been discussing there are a number of manufacturers, and that either there is competition among those manufacturers or there is not. If there are agreements among manufacturers of similar lines of products that prevent real competition, then the minister now presenting this measure has it within his power to deal with that matter under the Combines Investigation Act. There is no question about it. If there exist combines which prohibit real competition among manufacturers making the same lines, then it is the duty of the commissioner under the Combines Investigation Act to investigate the situation, and it is the duty of the minister to prosecute them. If there is real competition, then no single manufacturer can set a list of prices which are unreasonable and which are beyond the desire of the public to pay, for the simple reason that another manufacturer will undersell the first one by offering the same or a similar article. Then the laws of competition will still operate on the prices of the goods sold.

If this measure passes, then certainly it will be possible to encourage monopolies which might destroy that measure of competition which still remains as a safeguard.

At some later date, when the bill is in committee, it will be possible to direct a number of questions to the minister who has presented the measure to the house. On that occasion it will be my intention, as it will be the intention of others, to direct most searching questions to the minister as to the evidence he really has to support legislation of this kind, and why it is necessary that we proceed in this way. I say again that we are being asked to pass legislation that affects not only thousands of retail merchants but hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of our people who depend upon them for their daily requirements. We are being asked to pass legislation which will change our established mercantile system to a very considerable extent. We are being asked to do that without any evidence to support the course that is proposed and, above all, without any evidence as to why this sloppy and incomplete legislation should be adopted by this high court of parliament in this indecent haste.

There is an alternative presented in the amendment as amended by the subamendment: withhold the legislation and conduct an inquiry. In conducting that inquiry, also explore the advisability of having a fair trade commission. I would point out that in putting forward this recommendation I am simply following the stated view of the Conservative party which has been a matter of legislative as well as other record for a great many