

Corporate and Consumer Affairs

This interdepartmental committee has already begun an examination of those areas in which duplication of functions exists. Again, I apologize to the house for taking so much of its time this evening, but I believe I owe a duty to this chamber to explain as fully as I can, within the limits of the patience of my fellow members, just what our views are about a relatively new orientation of government powers at the federal level.

Mr. Nielsen: Before the minister passes to another subject, I wonder if he would permit me to ask him, when he refers to the setting up of the interdepartmental committee at the highest official level, whether he means the committee has been set up at the ministerial level or at the official level within the department?

Mr. Turner: The latter, Mr. Speaker, at the deputy minister level. We contemplate, of course, setting up subcommittees below that level. It is obvious that if policy matters flow from the advice of the interdepartmental committee, the ministers will have to pass upon the advice given by the interdepartmental committee.

Mr. Nielsen: The Economic Council of Canada recommended a study at the ministerial level and I was wondering why the government chose not to follow that advice.

Mr. Turner: That is true; as I have said, if decisions have to be made as a result of the advice flowing from the interdepartmental committee, then ministers will have to meet and make recommendations to cabinet on the results of those deliberations.

In respect of consumer information, it is proposed when the consumer branch is established that officers will receive complaints, queries and appeals for assistance on consumer matters. I hope that they will analyse these, prepare replies, and where possible forward them to the appropriate departments or agencies; categorize and identify recurring consumer problems and maintain a check on consumer service effectiveness. We have already started a pilot project along this line by employing existing departmental personnel temporarily assigned to this task. As I said at the resolution stage, the authority under the British North America Act and under the interpretation given to it as it affects consumer affairs, is divided. I hope the department will provide a central focus or clearing house in those areas of consumer complaint or query that involve the provinces.

We hope that eventually we will have a reciprocal network of information centres on this subject across the country. Among other things, the interdepartmental committee will be giving, and is giving, attention to the co-ordination of existing consumer information programs within the federal government. I hope the department will be able to bring problems and complaints to the attention of business people. A great many of these problems can be solved by businessmen, in their own interests, once they are aware of them.

The consumer must be equipped, by all reasonable means, to make a policy choice and a judgment on prices. This will be part of our aim, although we do not ever consider we will be in a position to tell retailers what to sell, manufacturers what to make or consumers what to buy. We do hope the consumer will know the price he is paying, the terms upon which he is paying interest if his purchase is on the instalment plan rather than for cash; that the advertising represents the true facts; that the package contains the goods advertised on the label and the amount of goods in those packages, the quality of those goods as reflected by the package and label as well.

● (9:50 p.m.)

Mr. Nielsen: Like \$2 wheat.

Mr. Turner: The hon. member for Yukon knows that the season in his part of the world is short enough that he is really not much authority on that. However, his memory is a long one.

I feel it is important that the department have particular concern for the various special minority groups of this country who need more attention than others. I think in particular of the low income consumer who must use his dollar with effectiveness. He must gain fair access to quality goods at low prices and be protected against unfair selling and credit practices. There is the elderly consumer who has special health, housing and nutritional needs—needs shown by those with disabilities. Then there is the rural consumer who has difficulty in gaining full access to the urban market because of the distance he or she is from that market. It will be our concern to search out and explore the ways of servicing these particular problems and gaining the co-operation of all governments and private groups in their solution.

The Economic Council pointed out that one key piece of federal legislation for protection