

*Combines Investigation Act*

indicated that he does not think it is going to have much effect on retail prices. He does not think it is going to have much effect on the cost of living. Others have said the same thing. If that is so, what single reason is there before this house today, what single reason has been presented by the government that the members of this house should accept the responsibility of upsetting the commercial and trade practices which have been in force in this country ever since the turn of the century? I do suggest in all seriousness that hon. members consider the practical aspects of this problem. It is easy enough to say we must not permit anything that would restrict competition; it is easy enough to say that these prices are fixed by manufacturers; it is easy enough to say that if prices are to be fixed it should be done by the government; but let us remember this. All the evidence we have is to the effect that it is the merchants themselves who want this price fixing, or rather this price agreement established, rather than the manufacturers, because the manufacturers could probably sell their goods in any event.

The evidence before the committee, limited though it was, made it reasonably clear to anyone that it was the merchants who seek agreements of this kind. Yes, by all means let hon. members explore the possibility of preventing abuses; by all means let hon. members seek to enact laws which will protect the Canadian purchaser from practices which are contrary to his interest; by all means let hon. members pass laws which will prohibit anything that is clearly anti-social. But that should be the test, and we should be able to say that it is anti-social, that it is contrary to the public interest, that it is actually doing some harm before we, with our responsibility as members of the high court of parliament, should pass judgment and say that something is a criminal offence which has never been a criminal offence before. That is what we are being asked to do.

Now, Mr. Speaker, unless there are reasons which have not been disclosed, unless there are reasons stronger than any that have been suggested, let every hon. member in his own mind ask himself: why should this bill not stand until the next regular session of parliament so a real inquiry could be made, so all the organizations affected could be really heard; and they were not heard. In that way the members themselves would have the advantage of the advice they would receive in regard to this subject.

If this bill should pass as it stands, it is not easy for anyone to predict exactly what will happen in any particular case. One cannot tell, for instance, whether in this instance

[Mr. Drew.]

the minister would be any more likely to enforce this measure than he has enforced section 498A. That of course is something we must bear in mind. It is perfectly true that the minister might take just as little action under this as was taken under section 498A, and of course that was exactly zero. But assuming for the sake of argument that it would be the intention of the government and of the minister responsible to enforce the act when it became law, then let us see some of the things that would happen which would have to be balanced fairly against whatever advantages are claimed; and those advantages are still very vague and uncertain in so far as any evidence we have had placed before us is concerned.

First of all, this would happen. If there is not to be agreement as to prices in regard to nationally-advertised products such as automobiles, refrigerators, washing machines, drugs or, shall we say, oil and gasoline, or anything of that nature, then of course there is no established price level. Then let us see what happens to the small merchants. Most small merchants deal with banks, and have certain credit at those banks. They depend upon that credit to a very large extent to carry on their daily operations. Most cautious bank managers would call in a small merchant and say to him, "I regret very much to point out to you that since I no longer know what your inventory is worth, I must ask you immediately to reduce your credit to a very substantial degree." The man would probably say, "Well, as a result of the order of Mr. Graham Towers last spring, something with which parliament had nothing to do, my credit has been already very severely restricted this year. I do not know that within the same year I am going to be able still further to pay off debts which I carry as an ordinary line of credit."

I do not need to suggest what the alternative would be. The alternative would be that a merchant who was not able to pay off the amount required would have no choice but to sell what he had at any price, to realize the amount necessary to secure the amount of the debts for which payment was being demanded.

I can imagine some people saying that it would be a very nice thing to get some of these things cheaply. Naturally we would all like to get them cheaply. Naturally we are all anxious to see things a lot cheaper than they are. For instance, we have pointed out that it would be a good thing if they could be cheaper today through the simple and easy process of the government removing the unnecessary sales tax which they