

Corporate and Consumer Affairs

Mr. T. C. Douglas (Burnaby-Coquitlam): Mr. Speaker, members of the New Democratic party approach this bill to set up a department of corporate and consumer affairs with mixed feelings. We had hoped for such a department but an examination of the bill shows it does not fulfil our hopes. The great Dr. Johnson once said that a widower who remarries represents the triumph of hope over experience. Certainly we should have been warned that when the Liberal government talked about legislation to protect the consumer the experience would certainly not warrant the high hopes we held.

For five years members of this party have been asking for the establishment of a department of consumer affairs because we believe that in a monopoly dominated society the only protection the consumer can hope to have is that provided by the intervention of government. We feel we have some consolation in the knowledge that our repeated demands over the years for a department of consumer affairs helped to create some public demand for such a body. Certainly the outcry of the consumers of Canada, particularly of the housewives, about two years ago was for a department of consumers affairs, and for some government machinery that could grapple with the steadily rising cost of living.

This government did what it always does. In this case it referred the matter to a parliamentary committee. Having given itself a little time in this way for the storm to abate it now brings down legislation, but this legislation only gives the pretence of doing something when in reality it will do virtually nothing that has not been done before.

The problem of the consumer is probably one of the foremost problems facing Canada today. The *Globe and Mail* of June 1, 1967 carried an article on a speech made by Sidney Margolius of Port Washington, New York. He is one of the outstanding writers on consumer affairs on this continent. He is quoted in this article as having said:

Consumer exploitation has replaced labour exploitation as the real problem of our times.

Later on in the article he is reported as having said:

Big banks and food, drug and auto corporations are just as guilty of consumer exploitation as smaller high pressure companies—

As the minister pointed out in his address last night, the consumers of this country spend some \$37 billion a year. If there could be even a 3 per cent or 4 per cent saving for the consumer this would greatly increase the

purchasing power of the people and would certainly raise the living standards of many people across Canada. I am sure those of us who have been advocating the setting up of a department of consumer affairs and the general public who have looked forward with great hopes to this legislation are bitterly disappointed. There is virtually nothing in this bill which gives the consumer any hope that the government is going to grapple effectively with consumer problems. The government is doing what the government has done about every major issue it has faced. It is burying its head in the sand like an ostrich with the hope that the problem will go away.

I was really sorry for the minister during his speech last night and today in that he was trying valiantly to make something worth while out of this legislation. It is certainly true in this case, as it has been in most other cases, that the longer the speech the less the bill contains. This was an attempt to blow up a balloon which looked colourful and enticing but was really full of hot air. The only justification for voting for this bill is that at least it will set up a department to which parliament will some day give the necessary power and teeth to really become a protector of consumer interests in this country.

I should like to make two points. The first is that the measures which are provided in this legislation for the protection of the consumer are not at all new. The government is merely gathering together various acts designed to protect the consumer against products which are injurious to health, against false weights and measures, against misleading advertising and packaging and to provide combines legislation which is supposed to protect the public against market manipulation. However, this is merely a gathering together of existing legislation. Will this be any more effective now because it is all under one minister than before when this legislation was under several ministers? Will this legislation have any more teeth now than it had before?

● (4:50 p.m.)

Mr. Woolliams: It is a gathering system.

Mr. Douglas: The minister said this afternoon that this is a new approach by the government to consumer protection. What is new about it? What new protection will the consumer have now when this legislation, most of it useless and ineffective, is collected under one minister? What more protection will it give than was the case when it was