



Minister Proposes 'Consumer Impact Statements'

Consumer Impact Statements will be a formal part of the Government's decision-making processes if Federal Consumer Affairs Minister Jeannette McHugh has her way.

McHugh will move the introduction of the policy at this year's ALP National Conference. The concept is similar to environmental impact statements; it is also reminiscent of the cultural impact statement model which was proposed some years ago in a consultancy report and which played a role in the process (still continuing) of developing a national cultural policy against which Cabinet decisions can be tested.

The Government already evaluates the impact of decisions on the environment, on women, on Aboriginal people and people of non-English speaking backgrounds, and on business regulation. In communications and broadcasting, where for decades decisions have been largely technology-led with scant regard for the effects on ordinary users of these services, the proposed move could be a significant step forward.

Speaking at a recent Evatt Foundation gathering, Jeannette McHugh said that consumer protection is a vastly different animal from the days when the words 'consumer issue' conjured up visions of inflammable children's clothes or up-and-down petrol prices.

Consumer issues now cut across virtually every government portfolio, and she has to be prepared to be involved in the responsibilities of many of her colleagues. This, she said in a classic understatement, was a novel development which not everybody has yet come to understand.

McHugh said that while she had her reservations about the Hilmer Report on competition policy, she believed that its recommendations would help to 'shake the dust out of our stodgiest and most protected institutions', many of whose practices work to the disadvantage of consumers.

The structures of consumer protection should be strong enough to survive changes of government or battle fatigue among consumer advocates or withdrawal of public goodwill, she said. Equally important, consumers should be active influences on - even determinants of - the policies and practices that affect them. Too often regulation is brought in too late, and her aim is to put consumers in a position to influence market behaviour, not just to ameliorate misbehaviour'.

As part of the new environment of consumer protection, the Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs (FBCA) is to examine the possibilities and dangers for consumers in developments ahead of us.

In her speech to the Evatt Foundation, the Minister singled out broadcasting and communications as areas where this process would be particularly relevant. The kinds of questions she said needed to be asked were: will

pay TV help or harm consumers? Do consumers want it? What is the future for the phone? What are the possibilities for interactive TV and are consumers keeping up? What exactly is roaring at us down the information superhighway?□



Consumer Representation in Communications

As part of a process of examining the effectiveness of current consumer protection mechanisms, the Bureau is also conducting Consumer Audits of government authorities to assess the level of consumer representation.

Last month Jeannette McHugh and the Minister for Communications, Michael Lee, released the results of the Bureau's audit of 20 bodies within the Communications portfolio.

The audit found that 18 out of the 20 organisations either had 'reasonably good' levels of consumer representation, or that the organisations dealt with 'such technical or specialised issues that representation was unnecessary'.

In *CU's* view, the latter conclusion sounds suspiciously like a cop-out. After all, it is precisely in the 'technical' and 'specialised' areas that consumer concerns have been ignored in the past, and the attitude which has tended to prevail is that what consumers don't understand can't hurt them. This is changing, with bodies like the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman and the Telecom Australia Consultative Council. But the process of change has been slow and has required long agitation by consumer organisations and special interest groups. And with every step forward, there seems to be one back - like the abolition a couple of years ago of the ABC's State Advisory Committees, which offered some opportunity for ABC 'consumers' to have their say about programs.

Despite the 'good progress' claimed by the FBCA audit in consumer representation in this area the Ministers agreed to set up a working party to improve consumer involvement in government communications instrumentalities. Was this a tacit admission that things could be better? Watch this space..... □