

WELCOME ADDRESS

BY

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AT THE OPENING OF THE

SYMPOSIUM ON CONSUMER INFORMATION,

BRUSSELS, NOVEMBER 23 - 25, 1977.

Welcome Address by Mr. Burke on November 23 at the opening of
Symposium on Consumer Information, Brussels, November 23 - 25, 1977.

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to welcome you to this Symposium on Consumer Information. Let me first say something about the means by which we were gathered here before discussing some of the ends we shall be seeking. The Conference has been organized by the Commission jointly with the Centre for Research in International Management of the Catholic University of Louvain, and with the collaboration of the European Research Association for Consumer Affairs. This has been a major undertaking, and I want to thank all of those who have contributed. Their efforts are further proof of the ever-growing importance attached to Consumer Information, both in the Commission and outside.

That importance was clearly emphasized, as you are well aware, in our preliminary programme for a Consumer Protection and Information Policy, adopted in April 1975. It seems to me that the provision of sound, detailed and lucid information must be at the very heart of any effective consumer protection policy. The 1975 programme defines the right to information and education as one of the five basic rights of the consumer: to my mind those five rights have a claim to take their place alongside the traditional civil rights universally recognized in democratic society.

Among the measures we have taken so far in the information field, I would mention first our Proposal for a Directive on the Labelling, Packaging and Presentation of Foodstuffs, which is currently being discussed at Council level. Then there is our Proposal for a Directive on Unit Pricing of Foodstuffs, sent to the Council earlier this year.

We have published three studies on labelling: one on the labelling of dangerous products, one on care labelling of textiles and one on the labelling of household maintenance products.

We have carried out surveys on various aspects of consumer behaviour, and a general survey on the preoccupations, aspirations and information of the European consumer.

Our Directorate-General for Information regularly publishes information of interest to consumers in Euroforum, and organizes a very valuable series of meetings and workshops for journalists who specialize in consumer affairs in the specialized and general press, in radio and in television.

As to future action, you know that we are preparing a Proposal for a Directive on Misleading and Unfair Advertising.

In addition, two brochures which should be of interest both generally and to specialists like yourselves, are in preparation. One will be concerned with consumer organizations and public authorities, the other will set out a bibliography on consumers.

In addition to this, we have just published our first report on Consumer Protection and Information Policy. This report covers the activities of the Community and the Member States in this area for the period between January 1, 1973 and December 31, 1976. It also reviews briefly the work carried out by the Consumers' Consultative Committee and the work of the European Parliament and of the Economic

and Social Committee in the area of consumer protection and information. It also includes, for the sake of completeness, the full text of the 1975 Preliminary Programme.

It is extremely encouraging to note that the measures taken in the Member States have in several cases followed the lines laid down in our Preliminary Programme. The application in the Member States of measures adopted at Community level has been satisfactory.

A particularly pleasing aspect of action in recent years is that, in some cases, individual Member States have in fact anticipated the kind of measures which the Commission intends to propose for adoption at Community level.

The report clearly shows the growing importance which the Member States attach to the implementation of measures in favour of consumers.

We all agree that the sum total of the measures taken so far is considerably short of our agreed objectives, but I believe that the rate of progress in the desired direction is increasing.

I myself find it enormously valuable, because the multiplication of activity in the consumer field over recent years makes it necessary, even for those of us who have an obligation to be very well informed, to have at hand a digest of the progress made and the projects being attempted.

We cannot over-emphasize the need for consumer information. Whatever the economic circumstances, the consumer is faced with a multiplicity of difficult choices. Today's consumer society is based on an ever-expanding range of goods and services. Each one of us spontaneously feels the need to acquire a large range of these. Most of us are manipulated into feeling that we require others. The range of choice and the pressure to participate in consumer society mean that we must constantly choose between a growing number of alternatives. Expansion of choice is frequently held to be one of the benefits of modern society. It must surely be the case that the corresponding disadvantage lies in the difficulty of the decision.

Without adequate information, the problem of choice is compounded. The consumer is faced with an ever-widening range of alternatives, and a persistent lack of adequate information about each option. To cope adequately with this situation, he needs a range of information which must increase even faster than the range of choice.

This is the problem before this Symposium. As you can see, it is a race in which we must run faster and faster in order to remain at the same relative point.

What can the Commission do to help? I have listed some of the measures which we have taken in this field. I have also indicated further measures which we propose to take. We clearly need more and more action along the same lines.

In this connection, I would like to refer to some criticisms which have recently been made of the Commission's action in the area of consumer policy. It is being said that a large part of our activities results simply in complicating life for the manufacturers and suppliers of goods and services, without creating a corresponding advantage for the consumer. I reject this criticism utterly. We have a growing number of rules on harmonization in a great many fields - labelling, ingredients in foodstuffs, technical standards for motor cars, and for many other products constantly used by consumers. Our action to promote harmonization of standards in these fields in the interests of consumers may in some cases cause difficulties to manufacturers and traders.

I know that I speak for all my colleagues in the Commission when I say that it is never our objective simply to hamper trade. But where difficulties for manufacturers and traders are an inevitable result of affording consumers the protection and the information which they incontestably deserve to have, they can only be regarded as the price of progress. We will ensure that our measures are worth the price.

I would make another point in this connection. While our action may from time to time cause difficulties to producers and suppliers, it is equally the case that successful harmonization of rules, standards and so on can have the effect of actually making life less difficult for those people who are affected. To give you a few examples:

we try as far as we can to anticipate and to avoid the harmful effects on consumers of the inclusion of certain substances in food and drink; we want to make cosmetics and toys safer, and textiles easier to use. The sooner we can do this, the less likely it is that manufacturers will have to change long established production techniques. In these circumstances, harmonization brings positive benefits to manufacturers, in addition to the benefits conferred on consumers. I would remind you too that such harmonization is demanded not only by consumers, but in many cases, it is demanded also by manufacturers.

I am determined that the Commission should continue to take intelligent, useful action on behalf of consumers. We will try as far as possible to minimize the difficulties caused to manufacturers and suppliers, but the interests of the consumer must be paramount in our estimation.

Talking to you now, I can only hope that you all feel fit and well rested. I can assure you that you will feel not at all like this on Friday afternoon next. Your programme for these three days is heavy and demanding. At the same time, I am quite sure that you will find your work interesting and constructive.

Looking over the subjects and papers which you will be discussing, I must say quite honestly that I envy you, and that I would like to be able to spend the next three days with you. I am quite sure that I would gain enormously thereby.

I will conclude by wishing you a successful and interesting three days and I look forward to seeing the results of your work.

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