

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER in H. of R.

THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C.

ON

STANDARDS FOR THE PROTECTION OF CONSUMERS

9. 5. 73

IN THE POLICY SPEECH WHICH I DELIVERED ON BEHALF OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY AT THE LAST FEDERAL ELECTIONS, I MADE PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE POLICIES OF A LABOR GOVERNMENT IN RELATION TO PRICES. IN THIS CONTEXT I REFERRED TO THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSUMER PROTECTION ACTIVITIES. CONSUMER KNOWLEDGE OF THE PROPERTIES AND QUALITY OF PRODUCTS CAN SERVE AS A POWERFUL RESTRAINT ON UNJUSTIFIED PRICE INCREASES.

OUR APPROACH WILL FOLLOW TWO PRINCIPAL PATHS, NAMELY:

1. THROUGH THE FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A FRAMEWORK OF STANDARDS DESIGNED TO PROTECT BOTH THE PHYSICAL AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS OF CONSUMERS; AND
2. THROUGH A FRAMEWORK OF APPROPRIATE LAWS.

MY PURPOSE AT THIS TIME IS TO FURNISH INFORMATION ON THE PROGRESS THAT HAS BEEN MADE IN REGARD TO THE FIRST OF THESE BROAD APPROACHES.

THE GOVERNMENT IS ACTIVELY ASSESSING BOTH THE NEEDS OF CONSUMERS AND ITS OWN EXISTING CAPABILITIES IN REGARD TO MEETING THOSE NEEDS. THIS EXAMINATION IS PROCEEDING. BOTH PROGRESS AND PLANS FOR FUTURE ACTION WILL BE REPORTED TO THE HOUSE AT APPROPRIATE TIMES.

CONCERNING THE QUESTION OF STANDARDS FOR THE SAFETY, QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF CONSUMER GOODS, THE GOVERNMENT RECOGNISES THE NEED FOR SUCH STANDARDS TO BE AT THE ONE TIME, BOTH REALISTIC AND EFFECTIVE. THE CONSIDERABLE BODY OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL EXPERTISE NOW EXISTING IN AUSTRALIA HAS MUCH TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ACCEPTABLE BALANCES BETWEEN THE NEEDS AND RIGHTS OF CONSUMERS ON THE ONE HAND AND THE PROBLEMS OF MANUFACTURERS ON THE OTHER.

THE GOVERNMENT WILL THEREFORE MOVE TO EXPLOIT THE CAPABILITIES OF ITS OWN SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES. VARIOUS DIVISIONS OF THE CSIRO AND LABORATORIES OF SEVERAL DEPARTMENTS ARE REPOSITORIES OF EXPERTISE ON WHICH WE CAN CAPITALISE IN FORMULATING SOUNDLY BASED AND REALISTIC STANDARDS FOR CONSUMER GOODS.

THE MINISTER FOR SCIENCE WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR CO-ORDINATING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CONSUMER STANDARDS AND HE WILL SHORTLY OUTLINE THE ACTIVITIES OF AGENCIES, WITHIN HIS DEPARTMENT, OF RELEVANCE TO CONSUMERS.

I PROPOSE SUGGESTING TO STATE PREMIERS AT THE PREMIERS' CONFERENCE TOMORROW THAT THEY ASK THEIR APPROPRIATE MINISTERS TO MEET WITH THE MINISTER FOR SCIENCE TO DISCUSS WAYS OF ARRIVING AT UNIFORM STANDARDS AND ENSURING THAT THE ACCEPTED STANDARDS ARE OBSERVED.

I HAVE DRAWN ATTENTION OVER MANY YEARS TO THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF THE DEFENCE STANDARDS LABORATORIES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SUPPLY. MANY OF THE ITEMS TESTED BY THE LABORATORIES WERE RAW MATERIALS AND OTHER PRODUCTS NOT GENERALLY OF CONSUMER INTEREST. ON OTHER OCCASIONS, TESTS HAVE BEEN COMMISSIONED BY PRIVATE ORGANISATIONS, THE RESULTS OF WHICH BECAME THE PROPERTY OF THE ORGANISATIONS CONCERNED. NEVERTHELESS TESTS HAVE BEEN CONDUCTED OF PRODUCTS WHICH COULD BE OF INTEREST ALTHOUGH THEY DID NOT INCLUDE ALL BRAND NAMES REASONABLY AVAILABLE NOR DID THEY GENERALLY RELATE TO ALL PROPERTIES OF THE GOODS.

THE DEFENCE STANDARDS LABORATORY HAS, FOR EXAMPLE, TESTED KITCHEN KNIVES, BICYCLE COMPONENTS, HACKSAW BLADES, HERBICIDES, SHOELACES, TOOTHBRUSHES, PENCILS, DETERGENTS AND CLEANING COMPONENTS, SUNGLASS LENSES AND FLOOR TILES. OTHER LABORATORIES IN THE COMMONWEALTH HAVE CONDUCTED TESTS PARTICULARLY IN RELATION TO PROCUREMENT OF STORES FOR THE COMMONWEALTH SERVICE. THE COMMONWEALTH STORES SUPPLY AND TENDER BOARD HAS TESTED A WIDE RANGE OF OFFICE EQUIPMENT AND SUCH OTHER MATTERS AS ELECTRIC LAMPS, CLOCKS AND TOWELLING. MANY OF THESE TESTS WERE CONDUCTED FOR THE BOARD BY THE P.M.G. WHICH HAS, IN ITS OWN RIGHT AS A MAJOR PROCUREMENT DEPARTMENT,

CONDUCTED OTHER TESTS SUCH AS ASSESSMENTS OF THE VALUE OF RETREADED TYRES. THE LABORATORIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF WORKS TO GIVE A FINAL EXAMPLE, HAVE TESTED ANTI-CORROSIVE COATINGS AND FLOOR TILES.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE TESTS CONDUCTED HAVE NOT BEEN IN ACCORDANCE WITH CONSUMER PRODUCT TESTING PRACTICE. MANY HAVE BEEN DIRECTED SIMPLY TO DETERMINE COMPLIANCE WITH CONTRACTUAL SPECIFICATIONS AND OTHERS HAVE NOT BEEN DESIGNED TO PROVIDE COMPARATIVE RESULTS. THE MOST SEVERE RESTRICTION FOR CONSUMER PROTECTION PURPOSES ARISES FROM THE FACT THAT THE PRODUCTS TESTED WERE NOT PURCHASED FROM SOURCES OF SUPPLY AVAILABLE TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC. TESTS CONDUCTED BY THE LABORATORIES GENERALLY INVOLVE PRODUCTS SUPPLIED BY THE MANUFACTURER AND AS IS WELL KNOWN, CONSUMER ORGANISATIONS WOULD NOT CONSIDER SUCH TESTS AS DEFINITIVE.

THE LABORATORIES AND AGENCIES IN THE COMMONWEALTH WILL PROCEED WITH A REVIEW OF TESTS CONDUCTED IN THE RECENT PAST THAT MAY BE OF CONSUMER RELEVANCE AND APPROPRIATE FOR PUBLIC RELEASE.

THE COMMONWEALTH PAINT COMMITTEE, WHICH IS SERVICED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF SUPPLY, WAS ORIGINALLY ESTABLISHED BY THE COMMONWEALTH IN THE LATE 1940'S, FOR THE PURPOSE OF ENSURING THAT THE PAINTS BOUGHT BY THE COMMONWEALTH FOR ALL PURPOSES, GAVE A SATISFACTORY SERVICE. IN TIME A NUMBER OF OTHER COMMONWEALTH BODIES, INCLUDING P.M.G., HOUSING, AND D.C.A., AND A NUMBER OF DEPARTMENTS AND AUTHORITIES OF

THE STATE OF VICTORIA, JOINED THE SCHEME IN A COLLABORATIVE WAY.

IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE SCHEME THE C.P.C. ISSUED SPECIFICATIONS FOR PAINTS, TESTED MANUFACTURERS' PRODUCTS OFFERED AS CONFORMING TO THOSE SPECIFICATIONS, AND CIRCULATED AMONGST ITS MEMBERS LISTS OF THOSE "APPROVED" PRODUCTS THAT TESTS SHOWED DID CONFORM. EACH PARTICIPANT, WHEN HE BOUGHT A BATCH OF "APPROVED" PAINT, CHECKED IT FOR CONFORMITY WITH THE SPECIFICATION. ALL OF THIS TESTING WORK WAS SHARED BETWEEN THE MEMBERS ACCORDING TO THEIR INTERESTS, TESTING FACILITIES, AND PAINT USE; ALL RESULTS AND EXPERIENCE WERE SHARED.

IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN AN EVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IN THE SCHEME AS THE CAPABILITIES AND FACILITIES OF THE MANUFACTURERS HAS INCREASED. NOW THE EMPHASIS IS ON REQUIRING MANUFACTURERS TO PRODUCE A CERTIFICATE OF TEST, FROM A LABORATORY CERTIFIED AS COMPETENT BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TESTING AUTHORITIES, DEMONSTRATING THAT THE PAINT CONFORMS TO SPECIFICATIONS.

THE DEPARTMENT OF SUPPLY RECENTLY WROTE TO AUTHORITIES IN THOSE STATES THAT ARE NOT AT PRESENT PARTICIPATING IN THE C.P.C. SCHEME, INFORMING THEM OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS, AND INVITING THEM TO RECONSIDER, IF THEY WISH, THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE REVISED ARRANGEMENTS.

IN CONSULTATION WITH ALL RELEVANT AUTHORITIES WE WILL INVESTIGATE THE APPLICABILITY OF THE C.P.C. SCHEME FOR CONSUMER PROTECTION PURPOSES. THE TESTING PRACTICES OF THE VARIOUS LABORATORIES AND AGENCIES WILL BE REVIEWED FROM THE SAME PERSPECTIVE. THEIR WORK WILL MAKE A CONTRIBUTION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL CONSUMER STANDARDS SCHEME. I HAVE ASKED THE MINISTER FOR SCIENCE TO CONTINUE HIS INVESTIGATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSUMER STANDARDS AND THE TESTING OF CONSUMER PRODUCTS.

IN CONJUNCTION WITH RELEVANT STATE AUTHORITIES, THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WILL BE APPLIED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSUMER INFORMATION WHICH WILL SERVE AS AN IMPORTANT RESTRAINT ON UNJUSTIFIED PRICE INCREASES.