

Consumer Agency Gets New Boost

SEVERAL federal agencies have been created which purport to protect consumers from real or supposed hazards, but so far none has authority to claim to represent and speak for consumers who might be regarded as incapable of speaking for themselves.

Bureaucrats consider this to be a serious shortcoming and such an agency is being promoted in Congress in S.200, which would create an "Agency for Consumer Advocacy" (ACA), embodying essentially the same theories previously offered in plans to create a "Consumer Protection Agency", but which failed.

Sponsors of S.200 say that it will not create a vast new bureaucracy, but they contradict this in stating the purpose of the act. It is "to promote protection of consumers with respect to the safety, quality, purity, potency, healthfulness, durability, performance, repairability, effectiveness, dependability, and cost of real or personal property, or tangible or intangible goods, services or credit." Wow!

Sponsors say that S.200 would in no way be able to regulate commerce. Yet in committee hearings, objectives of the act were defined as including "the preservation of consumer choice in a competitive market, prevention of unfair or deceptive trade practices, maintenance of truthful and fair advertising, promotion, and sales practices by a producer, distributor, lender, retailer, or other supplier of property, goods, services or credit."

ACA apparently would not be able to assess fines on the spot, as Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) inspectors may do, but ACA could file charges and demand hearings on complaints re-

ceived from businesses, associations, individuals, other government agencies, or its own staff. It could bring heavy pressure to gain compliance with ACA rules.

The bill denies regulatory or decision-making authority to ACA but specifically empowers it to influence decisions and regulations. ACA would be authorized to communicate with, provide information to, or provide assistance requested by any federal, state or local agency or court.

ACA also would be authorized to participate in both formal and informal proceedings of other agencies, acting as a clearinghouse for complaints against business enterprises, and with authority to collect and disseminate information of interest to

consumers.

Is more needed to create a bureau to fight with other bureaus or to harass businesses? Sen. James B. Allen, D-Ala., a member of the Senate committee which held the hearings and an opponent of the bill, summed up the situation as follows:

"If parents of a large family find themselves too busy to care properly for their many children, and the children, in turn, misbehave, would you recommend that the parents attempt to have yet another child in the hope that it would learn to discipline and tell stories on its older sisters and brothers? This bill not only follows that concept it leaves up to the new child to determine for itself what is and is not misbehavior."