THE SCOTTISH CONSUMER COUNCIL
- LOOKS BACK ON ITS FIRST YEAR
  AND FORWARD TO THE NEXT

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September 1976
On the eve of the second National Consumer Congress the Scottish Consumer Council celebrates its first anniversary on 15th September, 1976. Looking back critically over a year's work it answers some pointed questions put to it about what it has done so far and what it intends for the future.

What is the value of a Scottish Council? Surely all consumers in the UK have the same problems. Although the overall problems of consumers in the UK may appear similar there are substantial regional differences and in Scotland in particular there is a different legal and social structure through which these problems must be worked out. In its studies of Consumer Law in Scotland; in its report to the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection and to the Scottish Office on Consumer Councils and Nationalised Industries; in its comments upon the Consultative Paper on Transport and in various submissions about proposed legislative reforms including the Licensing Laws the Scottish Consumer Council has found particular Scottish consumer interests which needed to be expressed independently of U.K. or English interests. We have also learned that Scottish consumer interests at the EEC need to be given independent attention in the light of legal differences. Too often the Scottish situation is obscured by references to U.K. law.

Finally, problems of Devolution make it essential that Scottish consumers be represented by their own Council which can watch their interests in whatever constitutional reform emerges.
As a Government appointed body does the Council have to toe the official line?
The answer is a simple "No". Both the National Consumer Council and the Scottish Consumer Council have found that their sponsorship by the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection has meant in practice that the Councils are given opportunities to present opinions to Ministers which mean that consumer interests can be heard at the point where decisions are made. But the interest of any British Government must be to hear what consumers actually think, not to have a mirror-image parroting the official line back at them. The strong criticism of the official line contained in the Scottish Consumer Council's comments on the Transport consultative document is sufficient evidence that the Council thinks independently. Its recommendations on Devolution to the Scottish Office showed a difference in the attitude regarding the area of consumer protection which has to some extent been reflected in the Supplementary Statement on Devolution (of August 3).

Do you get any sense of urgency from Scottish consumers themselves?
It is a mixed scene, but "urgency" would probably be too strong a word. Here and there, now and then, growing gradually in intensity Scottish consumers do protest vehemently, but only under particular pressure. There is a tendency in Scotland not to expect too much and therefore not to be disappointed when things are not right. There is also in rural communities a surviving ability to rub along together with a fair degree of
tolerance of inefficient services or inadequate goods. This makes for peace. We get the impression that in Scotland most people most of the time have a good relationship with their shops and providers of services. No one would ever want to change this. But this makes it even more important that when despite this general harmony, protest does emerge it should be treated most seriously because it must reflect an extreme sense of injustice.

Moreover we have an unhappy sense that much of the present passivity of Scottish consumers is due to a low level of expectation plus lack of knowledge of where and how to take effective action. We shall be finding out more about the latter point when we finish our enquiry into Local Advice Services in Scotland. We are pressing the Scottish consumer councils for nationalised industries to take a more positive stand in defence of consumers rights.

Above all we hope that we can persuade the Community Councils to be alive to their opportunities for reflecting consumer opinion and that through them may come a stronger understanding of consumers' rights, obligations and sources of support.

The Scottish Consumer Council, like the National Consumer Council has a very wide remit. What are your priorities? It is right that the Councils have been given a responsibility for representing the interests of all consumers of goods and services including such services as those supplied by government and local authorities and particularly in regard to low income and disadvantaged consumers. At first sight the range of concern appeared beyond our resources. With
a limited staff and budget therefore the Scottish Consumer Council has tried to concentrate its main attention on those areas which no other consumer body is already actively representing. Two are outstanding.

**Consumer Law in Scotland**

The disadvantages of Scottish consumers had received little or no attention before the Scottish Consumer Council began its substantial work in this area - already achieving some marked success. The Scottish Consumer Council Legal Advisory Group has already established its credentials in this field. In one year the Scottish consumers' legal disadvantages have become clearly recognised both in London and Edinburgh.

**Local Advice Services**

The Scottish Consumer Council is currently undertaking the first general survey of advice services in Scotland. On the availability of advice the success of all consumer services is dependent - using the term "consumer" in the broadest sense. In this connection the role of the Community Councils may prove of special importance.

These are two very large areas of study. The Scottish Consumer Council's role is to keep both pots boiling steadily. But in addition we must be and are constantly on the alert for other areas of concern to consumers in which the heat may vary e.g. transport problems, metrication, housing problems, proposed U.K. legislation and EEC policies affecting Scottish consumers, etc.
Is the Council getting a good response to its representations?

Many of our first year's representations are still working through the pipeline, but we can already report positive responses. It can be claimed without exaggeration that a year ago it was not recognised in London, or even in Edinburgh that the Scottish consumer had problems in any way different from those of his English opposite number. Now the Scottish "difference" particularly in legal matters is clearly recognised and the Scottish Office and the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection have expressed in unequivocal terms their new awareness of the need for special solutions, where necessary, for the problems of Scottish consumers. This awareness has also been pressed for by Scottish Consumer Council in the EEC context.

Office of Fair Trading: has strengthened its Edinburgh office and agreed to publish a Scottish guide for consumers. We are in close touch with the Office of Fair Trading advising on the Scottish position.

Crown Office: has taken new administrative initiative to elicit information on how the Trades Description Act is enforced in Scotland and to bring together the Procurators Fiscal and the Consumer Protection Officers on whom this enforcement depends in order to ensure that the Act is as strongly implemented in Scotland as elsewhere.

Scottish Law Commission: has given a sympathetic hearing to Scottish Consumer Council proposals
on consumer law in Scotland and has asked us to pursue our enquiries.

Do you really represent the views of Scottish consumers? There is no single "consumer voice" but there are general consumer interests widely shared by consumers. We are making very sure that whatever views we put out are based on those expressed by consumers themselves. How to elicit these views has been one of our first concerns. We have used special research officers, public opinion polls and the resources of bodies with local groups like Age Concern (Scotland), Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Consumer Groups in Scotland and Disablement Income Groups and Scottish Women's Rural Institute. We do not want to develop a new independent network of local contacts (apart from our 12 individual members from all over Scotland). We want to encourage specialised individual "consumer" groups of all kinds and to tap their resources for our mutual advantage. The Post Office survey recently conducted has been an excellent example of what vivid, convincing evidence can be elicited from local sources, with the co-operation of Age Concern (Scotland), Disablement Income Group and Consumer Groups.

What next for 1976-77?

The Scottish Consumer Council resolves as its second year begins:

1. To press the urgent need for improving facilities for the enforcement of Scottish consumers' legal rights.

2. To encourage by all possible means a livelier knowledge of their own rights amongst Scottish
consumers - and at the same time to promote mutual understanding on an egalitarian basis between consumers and suppliers of goods and services.

3. To cement relations with all other bodies in Scotland actively representing consumer interests.

4. To press for extension of advice services for consumers.

5. To ensure that in all national and EEC discussions affecting consumer interests any special interests of Scottish consumers are kept clearly in sight.

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