
Richard Wainwright

Comment on the Paper by Koopman

The Setting

No particular comments on this analysis which explains the different environment for government consumer policy compared with that of one or two decades ago.

Consumer Policy and Its Nature

One of the fundamental problems which continually is raised regarding consumer policy concerns the question of what is a “consumer.” Is he an individual in a particular situation, i.e., when he is “consuming” as opposed to when he is “working”? Or does the concept go much wider? This is a question which has always to be posed when defining governmental or inter-governmental policy and the answer is not always the same. In particular the answer can be different depending on whether one is talking about health and safety, or protection of so-called “economic rights,” or providing the consumer with information.

The Effects of Deregulation

While agreeing that the principle of deregulation itself is not in conflict with the consumer interest, it is important not to forget the origins of this philosophy in a certain “laissez-faire” liberal move which has been particularly prevalent in recent years in government circles, notably in the United States and the United Kingdom. Deregulation can have a sinister side — it can mean removing some fairly basic protections which have been built up over the years and putting the “consumer” back at the mercy of unsafe and dubious marketing practices. It is, therefore, quite right and understandable that the consumer movement should be suspicious of this movement, given in particular its parenthood.

Development Within the European Community

I agree that the decision-making process at the Community level and in particular the unanimity requirement has caused problems for the adoption of Community legislation.

However, this does not really explain why, for example, consumer policy has languished at Community level compared with environment

policy which is also subject to the same decision-making constraints. The principal reason for this difference is, I believe, that many aspects of environment policy have obvious transfrontier implications, e.g., air and sea pollution — whereas it is not always clear why consumer policy has to be regulated at the Community level, e.g., rules on credit.

The idea of a working party of the Council staffed with senior consumer policy officials is certainly a good one and could indeed be adopted in other fields. As the paper rightly remarks, current working parties in the Council of Ministers tend to be filled with non-experts who are in no position to enter into any serious discussions or negotiations.

OECD

The description of the developments within the OECD Committee on Consumer Policy is extremely interesting, in particular its part in OECD's efforts to liberalise external trade. This is in stark contrast to the position within the Community institutions where overseas trade is dealt with by industrial and governmental experts with little or no input from the consumer or retailing side.

Final Remarks

Particularly interesting in the Final Remarks is the plea for governments to continue to "support consumer organisations." Strong and independent consumer organisations with a secure financial base are one of the best guarantees of the maintenance of consumer rights. It is they and not governments which can run campaigns and bring pressures, and it is also they which are much better, through their price and other surveys, at disseminating information to enable informed consumer choices to be made.

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