

RUBY HUTCHISON MEMORIAL SPEECH

Presented by Nick Stace
National Consumer Congress
11 March 2009
Adelaide

It's a great pleasure to be here tonight among so many friends from around the world. Some of you I've known for years; many more of you I am looking forward to getting to know over the next few days and years to come.

Tonight is a good example of how the consumer movement seems to bring the world closer together and it's by working together that we are able to make the world a better place for consumers.

And the next few days allow us all to share a common understanding of the real life issues that are affecting consumers today; and many of you have the power and influence to take these issues on and make a real difference to consumer's lives.

Although Australia is a long way from my home, I have to say working for CHOICE in many ways feels like a homecoming having worked at Which? in the UK for a number of years.

Many of you will also know that I spent time working in the front line of politics with Gordon Brown; it feels good to be back on this side of the fence.

To be in the consumer movement is to share a common bond; and like a family we're straight talking; passionate about what and who we stand up for; and we will defend to the end the rights of those we seek to protect. From time to time there are also disagreements, but I'll come to that later!

And like most families, we have within our fold some pretty remarkable people, some still very active, others who are sadly no longer with us. And in truth the consumer movement, like many families finds most of its strongest and most impressive characters in its women.

I had the great privilege of working with the late Dame Sheila McKechnie, formerly CEO at Which?. Those who met Sheila (and I can see the scars on the faces of those here tonight) knew that she was a force to be reckoned with.

I witnessed Government ministers being reprimanded like naughty school children, businesses quaking at the thought of an exchange of words or ideas with Sheila, but consumers seeing Sheila as their friend and champion. Sheila was a human dynamo and a self-confessed fully paid up member of the awkward squad.

Following Sheila's untimely death I helped to set up and then became Chair of a Foundation in her name, with the purpose of identifying and supporting the next generation of campaigners like Sheila. Thirty new campaigners every year are now supported by the Foundation.

To turn an Aussie expression on it's head: I'd like to move from Britain's Sheila to Australia's Ruby and the reason why we are all here tonight.

Ruby is celebrated for many reasons.

She was a passionate and tenacious advocate for social justice, the rights of women and democratic reform. At the end of her career she was described as rebellious and a fiery speaker - and that was from people on her side of politics!

Of course Ruby's foresight in setting up CHOICE, is something we should all be very proud of, but Ruby also challenged the very fabric of life in Australia. A woman from modest circumstances, following the hardship of the Great Depression and then WWII, her determination and passion brought immeasurable changes to people's lives.

Ruby and Sheila were two remarkable people among many in the consumer movement who quite simply changed the world in which we live. And sitting alongside them are countless unsung heroes with less notoriety but also tireless service to their fellow citizen.

As this talk is called the RH lecture, I've tried to imagine what Ruby would say tonight faced with the modern challenges of being a consumer and a consumer organisation today. And Ruby knew a thing or two about economic downturns and the struggle for hardworking people.

But before I do so I thought I'd set the scene by briefly reflecting on our achievements over the last few decades, which in many areas is thanks to the hard work of people in this room.

It's thanks to many of you that consumer goods are now generally safer and that proper standards are in place. And our work isn't done, everyday we continue to ensure that products and services are removed when they are harmful.

It's thanks to many of you that the consumer voice is heard on boards and panels and committees in industries and public services across our land. And I know our work continues day in day out.

It's thanks to you that the language of consumerism is now commonplace not only on the high street but in many other areas of our lives.

It's thanks to you that Government's around the world adopt consumer issues and campaigns as their own because they know they resonate with people and they know that we are the people to come to because we have those insights.

It's thanks to you that the consumer movement is trusted by the public, rightfully seen as their independent champion and a household name held with respect.

It's thanks to you that food ingredients and nutritional information are there for all to see on the label; that unfair bank charges are challenged; that consumers have rights of redress; that there is a greater confidence among consumers to exercise their

rights; that we provide a deterrent against those considering producing shoddy goods and services and we are ever vigilant to ensure those who do are punished.

We have provided the momentum for continuous improvement that Government and industry recognise that they must keep pace with.

We should be proud of these achievements but not satisfied; emboldened and never complacent; realistic about the change we have brought about and ambitious about what more needs to be done.

The legacy bequeathed to us is just a starting point for what is to come.

Our sights should be as high as our numbers are strong; that consumers everywhere should be as powerful as the organisations they come up against in their daily lives. That we seek to place consumer welfare as the ultimate goal of competition and effective markets; that consumers are empowered by trusted information and armed with the might of our collective voice.

As consumer organisations we should bring fear to those organisations whom have most to fear, and seek to serve our members and consumers at large with trustworthy, timely and essential information, advice and support.

We should be the vanguards of change, for a modern world has much that can be good, and by embracing change we will be able to react to emerging trends so that we can promote the positive and mitigate the negative.

There is much more to be done and our work won't be complete until each sector puts the consumer first, whether through their remuneration structures, the design of their products and services, the structure and regulation of markets or because the prevailing culture has the consumer at its heart.

Our work is not complete unless consumers can have confidence that their superannuation arrangements are right for them, that banks do not abuse their position, where companies don't use deliberately confusing marketing to sell stuff we don't want and will harm our children.

Our work is not complete unless companies start to behave more responsibly and that means not waiting for legislation to act but doing so because it's the right thing to do.

And for those here representing Government, don't think that you have fallen off our radar.

I worked for Gordon Brown at a very expensive time for the British people with many \$billions being thrown at the banking sector in an attempt to solve the financial crisis.

It did occur to me after successive bank bailouts that had the Government listened to consumer groups in the first place and put proper regulation of the financial services sector in place, those billions could have been put aside for a common good rather than a bailout to a badly regulated and often self-interested sector.

On behalf of consumers we will keep your feet close to the fire to make sure that the services you provide put the consumer first and the industries you regulate pass the consumer test.

But I don't want to only turn the heat on industry and the Government. I want to briefly set out five conditions that we must all meet if we are to meet the challenge for consumers, here they are:

Firstly we must know consumers better than anyone and understand how they continue to change;

Secondly, we must celebrate and work with those who have common cause and be unreasonable and unrelenting on those whose actions or intent cause consumers harm;

Thirdly, we must offer the best products and services we can, and at this time we must be particularly focused on hard pressed consumers;

Fourthly, we must understand but not speak the language of Government and industry, work with but never be captured by any other interest other than the consumer;

Finally, we must get out of our comfort zone, take hard decisions and never lose sight of the service we must offer consumers.

I want to take a few minutes to expand on each of these issues and suggest to you that if we don't do these things we will fail the Ruby test by closing the book on much needed change and allowing this to be the last chapter of an inherited legacy.

Firstly, we must know the consumer better than anyone else and understand how they continue to change. In many markets the consumer is no longer helpless, to treat them as such is to patronise the very people we seek to represent. The challenge for us surely, is how do we stay relevant; make life simpler, better and faster for people.

Consumers are more demanding than ever before, they expect products to meet their needs. In fact the best products and services are those that are designed by those who use them. In many areas consumers are no longer prepared to be receptors of products and services decided in a boardroom far removed from their lives.

Companies that understand the new consumer realise there is much to be gained from working with consumers to get their products and services right. And in the way we engage with consumers, it must be on their terms, not the old top down model of engagement.

Consumers are across many of the modern challenges like climate change, and what they need from us is the truth behind company claims. They also want to know what action they can take that still allows them and their families to lead a good life. Consumer solutions rather than adding to their problems is what people want.

Secondly, we must celebrate and work with those who have common cause and be unreasonable and unrelenting on those whose actions or intent cause consumers harm.

It's true that many businesses are now positive role models which we should celebrate. Corporate social responsibility for many years was an expression used by environmental campaigners which is now common parlance in boardrooms around the world. But while the words are impressive, actions are often disappointing.

While toasters no longer explode in peoples' faces, similarly high levels of irresponsibility are causing early deaths and hardship in our population whether through rising levels of diet related diseases or retirement incomes lost overnight.

In some markets, particularly financial services, people cannot be expected to understand each product, much less so when the company itself doesn't know what the product is for or how it will help their customers.

And this complex consumer world has led to ever increasing and often conflicting information sources. When John F Kennedy identified information as one of the core consumer rights, he couldn't have foreseen the volume of useless and unnecessary information that would in the end help to obscure the truth. The world is ever more complex which is why our purpose has never been clearer.

While some companies have excellent customer service others add to the daily frustrations of being a consumer. Do you ever feel like you are working in a call centre? Dial 1 for this, dial 5 for that, say yes for the other, followed by a pre-recorded message saying 'I heard no, please replace the handset and try again'.

Phone companies that make it impossible for you to speak to anyone other than a computer generated voice; banks that know how to take money off you but find it difficult to give it back; helping consumers fight these everyday battles, armed with clear and independent information is our core purpose and it's never been more necessary than today.

And we can and should go further in helping consumers take direct action as we did over unfair bank fees where over 50,000 people were helped by CHOICE to reclaim their money back. A new wave of consumer activism is taking hold in this country and at CHOICE we will always be on the side of hard working consumers, helping them get justice and the best deal they can.

Thirdly, we must offer the best products and services we can, and at this time we must be particularly focused on hard pressed consumers. The economic downturn puts pressure on everyone, including CHOICE, which is why we have a financial as well as a moral imperative to provide the best products and services we can.

And so to be on the side of hard working consumers we will not be putting prices up this year for those members who help us keep our prices down.

Our focus is on helping people through this downturn; tougher economic times mean that many people have less to spend and we have an obligation to help consumers find the very best deal.

That's why in addition to the information, advice and support we provide through our publications we have also set up a CHOICE Switching service to help people find not only the cheapest but also the greenest tariffs for gas and electricity; and it's also why Grocery Choice is so important.

Fourthly, we must understand but not speak the language of Government and industry, work with but never be captured by any other interest other than the consumer. In order to influence decision makers we must understand their language and their processes but we should never be captured by them. We may sit on Government committees but that should never silence what we say publicly.

Some of our organisations and I include CHOICE, accept money from the Government and we must never allow this to compromise what we say.

At CHOICE we are operating Grocery Choice as a separate entity to our core business which means that we will never be reliant on Government money for our very survival. We will continue to be critical of Government and industry when we have cause to do so and if we failed this test our very reason to operate would be lost.

But let's be clear, where we have common cause we have a duty to work together. Let me give you an example.

In recent years some of the biggest challenges to dis-functional markets in the UK have come about because of action that Which? has taken through super-complaints and class actions; both powers that have been negotiated with the Government.

Which? has challenged everything from the structure of the European new car market, to the provision of NHS dentistry. I also lead class actions against price fixing.

I know there have been some discussions in Australia about these powers, so lets move on from talking about them to legislating for them. If we are serious about putting the consumer interest first we need the armory to do that.

Which leads me to number five. We must all get out of our comfort zones, take hard decisions and never lose sight of the service we must offer consumers. None of us should be so constrained by our past that our future is too narrowly defined.

Just because decisions are hard doesn't mean they should be avoided. Serving the consumer is our core purpose and if testing our resolve is part of the process we have a duty to do that.

If consumers want us to help them to switch their utility providers, we should do so. If consumers want lower grocery bills and want us to take on the supermarkets, we should do so. And if we're asking the right question, 'how can we meet the consumers needs and serve them to the best of our abilities?', we will always force ourselves to go further.

The way we did things many years ago was the way we did things many years ago. Life was different, expectations were lower, and the consumer was less demanding. You know Ruby would have pushed us to go further and so should we.

Like many families we won't always agree, but in the end we all agree that the consumer drives our mission and their needs come before our sensitivities. And our duty is to serve consumers by knowing and responding to their needs, and being forthright in our pursuit of fairness and justice for all consumers.

The world has changed, so have we and so we will need to continue to change in order to serve consumers as well as we can.

I believe we are as relevant today as we were 49 years ago, whether it's helping people to purchase the best value goods when times are tough, campaigning for responsible businesses in financial services or providing the very best service we can to an ever expanding group of consumers willing to become members of our organisations.

There are moments in history when you look back and are thankful for the decisions that were taken at that time. We are thankful today for Ruby's contribution to the consumer movement and we owe it to her that future generations should look back at this time and see that we took the right decisions to change how we operate to work more effectively for the consumer.

The course of our destiny, into oblivion or into every household in the country; irrelevant and quirky or an essential tool for every consumer; this time is our time to choose. Our time has come to prove to our movement, our members and consumers more widely that we are prepared to make the right decision for them.

A final chapter of an inherited legacy, or the next chapter in an epic journey that sees the consumer take their rightful place in the driving seat in boardrooms, across public services and into our government ministries.

This week's conference focuses on many of the core issues affecting consumers today. The measure of our success will be that we are all better informed and more determined to bring about change that will improve the lives of consumers.

Ruby's vision was to change the consumer world, it's our vision too. We have a duty to modernise Ruby's legacy so that consumers can truly be as powerful as the organisations they come up against in their daily lives.

Thank you.

END.