

VIENNA, 15 MARCH 2006

MESSAGE OF COMMISSIONER KYPRIANOU

Ministers, President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr Markos Kyprianou, the European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, very much regrets that he is unable to be here in person today to celebrate with you the 8th European Consumer Day.

And all the more so since this event, organised by the Austrian Council Presidency in co-operation with the Economic and Social Committee, will examine the important challenges in relation to consumer education.

I have been asked to share with you the Commissioner's thoughts and concerns on this topic.

Consumer Day is an occasion to remind ourselves of the ultimate goal of our economic and political ambitions, and of what we are striving to achieve for European society as a whole.

The aim of the present Commission is to improve progressively the quality of life of each and every individual citizen.

Consumer policy is a key area for the Commission – it is one of the cornerstones for building a Europe that is closer to its citizens and one in which citizens have more of a say in the development of policies. Moreover, effective consumer policies have the capacity to reconcile competitiveness and citizens' interests.

At EU level, the context for consumer policy is the Internal Market. This should work for the benefit of both consumers and business.

Bearing in mind that final consumption expenditure represents well over half of EU GDP; the importance of consumers to the EU economy can never be emphasised enough.

Satisfied and confident consumers are essential to provide the demand which fosters a competitive and thriving business sector.

However, there seems to be a structural imbalance between business and consumer representation at EU level, and the single market is too often seen as primarily a good thing for business, but not so significant for consumers.

To redress these imbalances, the first and perhaps most obvious solution could be stronger legislation to protect consumers. But the imbalance is often such that it is hard to solve effectively through legislation alone.

Complementary solutions therefore need to be found – for example through wider use of European-wide codes of conduct and an improved information and education policy for consumers in Europe.

Compared to legislative action, education and information initiatives are much more difficult to implement, more costly and their effects can only be seen in the longer term.

But the major advantage of the education path is certainly its capacity for long-lasting effect and life-long impact, enabling consumers to face new situations with increased confidence and fewer difficulties.

Consumer education and consumer information are distinct although closely related and often complementary.

Information has a rather short-lived role allowing consumers to make specific choices, whereas education is really aimed at giving consumers a more solid grounding – the skills and knowledge to face new and unforeseen situations.

The voice of European consumers is not always heard or indeed fully taken into account by public authorities or by business interests, be it in the process of preparation of new legislation or when there are specific problems to be solved.

This is mainly due to three factors:

- firstly, consumers do not always have sufficient information about their rights, and therefore do not even know that there is ground for complaint;
- secondly, once consumers have learned that they have rights, they might not know how to ensure that these are respected; and
- thirdly, even when consumers know that they have rights, and know they can seek support from

consumer organisations, those associations might sometimes be too weak to intervene on an even footing with the involved parties.

The Commission has launched several initiatives to try to improve the situation at European level in terms of consumer representation, information and education. It is clear that in these areas there are wide differences across the Member States.

The merged European Consumer Centres network and our existing information and education projects have given us a platform upon which to build.

It should be stressed that the task of empowering the European citizen cannot be done by any one of the actors in this area alone – and certainly not by the Commission alone.

We need help and support from all stakeholders in this endeavour, including from business. And we need sufficient resources against a background of European and national budgets getting tighter and tighter.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Commission looks forward to seeing the conclusions of the 8th Consumer Day.

We hope very much that they will help identify innovative ways to endow every European citizen with the means to develop an “active consumer” mentality.

Active consumers play a key role in enhancing the EU competitiveness, which is central aim of the so-called Lisbon agenda.

Clearly, even more than with traditional elements of consumer policy, education should involve the cooperation of different partners at EU and national level – national authorities, consumer organisations, academics, social partners and business.

May I finish by expressing Commissioner Kyprianou’s best wishes to you all for a fruitful and absorbing day, and his warm thanks for your continued dedication towards improving the position of the European consumer.

Thank you.