

# CAPTIJN: A consumer protection law would benefit all Ontarians

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World Consumer Rights Day, which falls on March 15 this year, is a global annual awareness campaign for consumer rights. The late U.S. President, John F. Kennedy was the first world leader to formally address the issue of consumer rights in 1962. In a ground-breaking speech, he said consumers should be respected and protected against market abuses and injustices, that they have the right to safety, and to be informed, to choose, and be heard. This day has been remembered since then to encourage action on important consumer rights initiatives.

Most of us would think this is something we don't need in Ontario. In the purchase of goods and services, we like to think we're one of the countries usually praised for justice and fairness. But having rights and getting them enforced are two different things, especially when the person on the other side is a deep-pocketed corporation or government agency.

Too often we've read news reports of corporations that ignore consumers, and then financial and emotional exhaustion forces them to give up on their rights. Too many times bad corporate

behaviour is secret, and goes unaddressed. Gradually reducing someone's strength through sustained pressure, a common courtroom tactic, gives a high success rate to the big battalions.

Consumers are the life-blood of businesses, but if they feel cheated or ripped off, and don't feel their rights have been protected, this can destabilize families and communities and create anger and cynicism.

Poorly-built new homes with mould or leaks are problems for new home buyers. Yet the process is long and complex to get anyone to fix these defects. Selling a new home without disclosing the furnace has been previously used is wrong, but still going on, and authorities seem to have turned a blind eye. Selling heating equipment door to door with exorbitant exit penalties is wrong. So is a delivery truck damaging a condo's common entrance and letting the unit-holder pay for repairs. Forbidding a homeowner to make a recording of an inspection in his own home is wrong, as are clauses in contracts which raise the price of a new home years after the purchase price has been agreed upon. But many consumers experiencing these things are intimidated into positions where they eventually have to give up. Some go to the media to try to expose wrong-doing, but it's not the job of the media to enforce consumer protection laws. "Get a lawyer" says the Consumer Ministry, while knowing the cost of lawyers is out of reach for most ordinary Ontarians.

What can be done?

The Ontario NDP recently tabled the Consumer Watchdog Act, to create an independent organization to oversee all consumer protection matters in Ontario. This would give consumers an independent organization to call to seek help and investigate businesses if they're bypassing consumer protection laws.

Why would any MPP vote against the Consumer Watchdog Act? Who's against protecting consumers? Give me one good reason.