

Consumer day speech by Executive Director, IPS, Dr. Saman Kelegama, 15.3.2016

I extend a warm welcome to all of you for the World Consumer Rights Day Forum 2016 organized by the IPS. This is the 4th occasion that the IPS is organizing a seminar to mark this important day.

I extend a special welcome to our Chief Guest Dr. Wickrema Weerasooria, Insurance Ombudsman, Senior Adviser to President, Senior Faculty Member of the PIM and Chairman Board of Trustee of the IPS Endowment Fund. Ambassador Sarath Wijesinha who was the former Chairman of the Consumer Affairs Authority, has been a key player in encouraging the IPS to organize this event and we are pleased to have him to deliver the key note address today.

I welcome the panelists at today's sessions, representatives of various consumer organizations, government, private sector, academia, and civil society organizations.

As you know, the World Consumer Rights Day is marked to raise global awareness about consumer rights. This is an important issue for everyone in this room regardless of which institutions they represent, as we are all consumers. Any individual that uses an economic service or commodity - even if it's something as simple as buying a loaf of bread - is considered a consumer, and the purpose of this Day is to highlight the importance of having their interests represented in the execution of government policy as well as in the development of products and services.

When talking about consumer rights, people often cite a speech given by the former American President John F Kennedy over 50 years ago, where he outlined the importance of safe guarding the interests and recognizing the rights of consumers. In that speech, he highlighted 4 basic rights as being the foundation on which any legislature protecting consumer interests should be based on:

The right to safety: that is, to be protected against the marketing of goods which are hazardous to health or life.

- The right to be informed: that is, to be protected against fraudulent, deceitful, or grossly misleading information, advertising, labeling, or other practices, and to be given the facts that a consumer needs to make an informed choice.

- The right to choose: that is to be assured, wherever possible, of access to a variety of products and services at competitive prices; and in those industries, in which competition is not workable and Government regulation is substituted, an assurance of satisfactory quality and service at fair prices.

- The right to be heard: that is to be assured that consumer interests will receive full and sympathetic consideration in the formulation of Government policy, and fair and expeditious treatment in its administrative tribunals.

Consumer rights generally and traditionally has been about addressing the power imbalance, between the consumer, who purchases a particular good, and the person supplying the good, which is the retailer. You go into a shop and buy an item-- almost invariably, the retailer has more information than you.

Clearly, communication and information go hand in hand when it comes to building a successful consumer policy. The consumer must be aware of their rights. They must be aware of the "potential force" they

represent. The consumer must know for what they are "fighting for "If not: they cannot "fight" or, rather, consume appropriately.

As such, it is important that both consumers and policy makers get together on occasions such as this to identify issues in the current environment that are of relevance to consumers. Today we will be discussing certain key issues that currently have an impact on Sri Lankan consumers and talk about what policies are needed to make sure that the interests of the consumer are safeguarded.

It is the duty of any government to ensure that consumers are looked after and their interests represented in the best possible manner. Forums such as this provide a platform for such engagement. It provides the government with an opportunity to communicate to the public about their policy orientations and the steps being taken to further consumer rights, while consumers can also voice their concerns and provide feedback.

Each year a specific theme concerning consumers is chosen. In 2015 it was Health Diets, In 2014 it was Fair Mobile Services, in 2013 - Consumer Justice, and in 2012 - Our Money Our Rights. The focal point or theme for this year is on antibiotics on which our Guest of Honour will be speaking on. But all other presentations today will not be on this theme.

The topics discussed today will cover areas that the general public face on a daily basis. One of them is fuel pricing that affects all areas of an economy, both directly and indirectly, and with oil prices having seen a sharp decline worldwide recently, it is appropriate to look into how best to go about implementing fuel pricing policies so as to benefit the everyday consumer.

As a consumer, it is impossible to keep track of the manufacturing process of every good that is available for consumption. Standardization is therefore a very important mechanism to allow the consumer to gauge the quality of whatever it is that they are getting. Proper standardization practices provide consumers with a sense of security and confidence about their purchases, allowing them to make an informed choice, which is one of the four basic rights I mentioned earlier.

Supermarkets are a vital component of the retail market, especially in urban areas. Understanding competitive issues that occur in this industry is therefore of great import to consumers. This is not limited to the interaction between the consumer and the supermarket itself, but also extends to the relationship between the supermarket and its suppliers as this could have an indirect impact on consumers.

We all have one goal – to protect the interests of the Sri Lankan citizens and to build public confidence in the consumer products. I hope that the deliberations would help all of us who are consumers, to obtain solutions and new ideas by the end of the seminar.

I thank you.