

ACCC Deputy Chairman goes global

Allan Asher, the Deputy Chairman of the Commission, leaves the organisation on 5 November. He will be taking up a new position at Consumer International's headquarters in London, as the global director of campaigns. With his wife, Joan, and 23-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, Mr Asher will arrive in London in December ready to start at Consumer International in January.

Before doing so, Mr Asher will fly to Durban, South Africa, the morning after finishing at the Commission, to attend the Consumers International triennial congress.

As well as chairing several sessions at the congress, he will also attend his final meeting as president of ISCCO — the International Society of Consumer and Competition Officials — an organisation for government officials working on competition and consumer issues.

Mr Asher spoke recently about his new position and his perceptions about the direction of consumer policy.

What is Consumer International and who belongs?

It's a federation of 260 voluntary consumer groups and government agencies all of whom have, as a major part of their activities, the promotion or protection of the interests of consumers. They come from 112 countries — almost every country in the world has a consumer group. Consumer International has offices in different regions: in South America, Africa, South-east Asia and Europe.

As global director of campaigns, what will you be doing?

I'll be directing the global campaigns in those areas where there are now global rules and policies — areas like the health, safety of food, international trade, competition and economic issues. The consumer voice now is very much a global one and I'm delighted to be able to continue a lot of the things I've been doing on a smaller Australasian stage.

It's a new position. The organisation has come to recognise that there is a need for a greater degree of coordination of international campaigns. Up till now, many of these have been run on a regional or national basis by constituent member organisations or in some of the regional offices. But CI recognises the globalising nature of many of these issues and the need for a global response.

It's a 3-year contract. I think it will certainly be fun. In fact I elevate that to one of the most important aspects of work. I can say that every job I've done, first and foremost has been fun. And I'm also able to say that they've all been jobs that have had a socially useful function. Perhaps with one exception as I started my career working for chartered accountants. That was neither fun nor socially useful!

Since those chartered accountant days, your career has been consumer-oriented. How has the perception of consumer policy changed during that time?

Twenty years ago, people conceived of consumer policy as being about social justice, about redressing some profound imbalance in market power. But from the mid-80s onwards that has changed a lot and, now, properly understood consumer policy is about mainstream economic policy. It is still about justice but also about making markets work. It's about providing the demand side of the economic equation with the same degree of focus that the supply side has had. Together with globalisation, that means it is a huge field that covers most areas. But certainly health care, food and nutrition, marketing, information technology, manufacturing and product safety are very much at the core of consumer issues.

What do you hope to achieve at Consumer International?

Much the same as I've hoped to achieve everywhere else — at the Australian Consumers Association and the ACCC. When I say that consumer policy used to spring from a sense of justice and welfare, the fact that I say now it's mainstream economic policy doesn't strip it of that other character.

And at the international level, the starkness between the poor and the rich, in both

dysfunctional economies and functional ones, is much greater than anything we witness here. I've just been in Bangladesh doing some work on their electricity system and it's useful to contemplate that in Bangladesh there are 148 million people and 120 million of them have no electricity whatsoever. Eight out of 10 citizens have no electricity. There's a growth in demand each year of something like 20 per cent but supply isn't increasing at all. So that's a crisis and it needs reformation of government policies, of the funding mechanism, of international investment, of safety. You can't even have an investment in infrastructure until you have the rule of law and systems for incentives. You have to deal with problems of corruption and capacity building in government. The missing ingredient in developing countries is that there is no voice for civil society.

So, the dimensions of the challenges affecting developing countries, of international trade policy, the growth of sales of foods that incorporate genetically modified organisms without even telling consumers — those things are outrageous and they do require a response in justice, as well as a proper organised consumer response. Those are the issues that I'll be working on. Trying to make markets work internationally, as I've tried to do here. Trying to deal with the worst of consumer problems and bring international economically sensible solutions to the fore. Just a minor task!

I've worked in 29 countries over 20 years in this sort of area — for example, Egypt, the Philippines, Bangladesh — and I think a common denominator is that there is not a sufficient voice for the institutions of civil society such as consumers groups, women's groups, church groups. Governments aren't up to the task of adequately representing the demand side of the marketplace.

Effective rule making such as developing standards and policies, has long since left national geographic jurisdictions, and these decisions are now being made in international fora. Frankly, I don't see that as a frightening prospect as some do. Some fear the loss, or potential loss, of national sovereignty. I say that's a foolish fear for two reasons. One, there's no reason to suppose that decisions made at international fora are any better or worse than those made locally. And secondly, it

already happened 50 years ago when the Bretton Woods institutions, such as the IMF and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, were set up after the war. Rather than resisting or railing against globalisation, it's a matter of ensuring proper representation of those public interests in those international fora.

Will you have a continuing involvement with the ACCC?

Inevitably. I think a strong feature in the consumer movement recently has been the notion of interconnectedness, of networks. I'd be expecting to be working closely with the ACCC in many areas, and the FTC in the United States, as well as our sister organisations around the world. I also see something of a convergence of the interests and representation of governments, business and consumer groups. I think that's a sign that markets really are starting to work, in the sense of delivering that consumer sovereignty outcome that Adam Smith wistfully looked for two hundred years ago.

ACCC appointments

Professor Allan Fels has been reappointed Chairman of the Commission until 30 June 2004. The Treasurer, Mr Peter Costello, announced his reappointment on 2 November, saying it had been made with the support of all States and Territories. Professor Fels has been chairman of the Commission since it was formed in November 1995, and before that was chairman of the Trade Practices Commission from 1991 until 1995.

Also reappointed was Dr Tom Parry, chair of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal of New South Wales, as an ex-officio member until 6 June 2005.

Following his appointment as the Territory's inaugural part-time Utilities Commissioner, Mr Alan Tregilgas was also appointed as an ex-officio member of the Commission until 31 March 2004.