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Volunteers: Backbone of the Consumer Movement in Canada

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The Future

The year 2001 is the International Year of Volunteers. In Canada, volunteering is one of the most important and fundamental acts of citizenship and philanthropy. More than 7.5 million Canadians offer their time, energy and skills to some 175 000 not-for-profit organizations in every sphere — literacy, hospitals, Scouting, sports and the arts.

Nowhere have volunteers been more prominent than in the Canadian consumer movement, whose very origins are in voluntarism. This year's celebration of volunteers and volunteering presents the perfect opportunity to look back over the history of the Canadian consumer movement.

The Consumer Movement in Canada: The Early Years ■ ■ ■ ■

Though the modern Canadian consumer movement was born in the 1960s, its initial impetus was the difficulties 19th century farmers and workers faced trying to gain access to savings and lending services. Over the next several decades, individuals banded together to address pressing needs in their communities:

- In 1897, Canada's National Council of Women, a federation of women's groups across the young country, argued for standard weights and accurate measures for food and consumer goods.
- At the turn of the 20th century, Alphonse Desjardins developed a hugely popular savings and loan co-operative in Quebec.
- Meanwhile, agricultural co-operatives banded together to buy farm supplies and sell produce.
- The early 1920s saw the formation of co-operative creameries and wheat pools.
- In 1932, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation encouraged the creation of co-operatives to help generally low-income consumers.

After World War II, the Canadian Association of Consumers (CAC; see box) won its postwar fight to lift the Canadian ban on margarine, resulting in lower butter prices. In the ensuing years, CAC volunteers have provided consumers with information about food, textiles, health and nutrition, and have worked with government to develop packaging and labelling standards.

In Canada and elsewhere, women have been leaders in the consumer movement since its earliest days. Women led boycotts of producers and retailers, organized food co-operatives and founded their own banks and credit unions.

One of the first and most important consumer organizations, the Canadian Association of Consumers (CAC), began as a women's organization in 1947. By 1960, the CAC included 517 active consumer groups. In 1962, the CAC changed its name slightly to the Consumers' Association of Canada, and amended its constitution to admit men.



The Canadian Home Economics Association (CHEA) is a national association of graduates from programs in areas such as consumer and family studies, food and nutrition, home economics, human ecology, and textiles and clothing. Since the 1930s, CHEA members in education, business and the public service have promoted an improved quality of life for Canadians, with a special emphasis on food security. As with members of consumer groups of all types, CHEA members spend considerable time working in the community, running programs and working with other groups to promote consumer issues.

Consumer Magazines

The waxing and waning of Canadian consumer magazines reflect the ups and downs of the consumer movement itself. In the 20th century, new products multiplied: household appliances, packaged foods, cleansers, soaps and toothpaste. Canadian consumer organizations took the lead in testing consumer products and publishing results. In 1963, the Consumers' Association of Canada published the first issue of its bilingual magazine, *Canadian Consumer/Le Consommateur*. Soon, other publications such as the annual *Toy Report* and magazines, such as *La Consommatrice*, *Le Réveil du consommateur*, *Consommation* and *Protégez-Vous/Protect Yourself*, came on the scene, and the height of the consumer movement saw subscriptions at an all-time high.

Subscriptions declined, as membership in consumer organizations fell off during the 1980s. The combination of relatively small subscription bases, organizational changes in the producing groups, and cuts in government subsidies severely challenged Canadian consumer publications. Today, though Quebec is well served by its consumer magazines, *Protégez-Vous/Protect Yourself* and *Consommation*, the need for Canadian English-language consumer publications continues unaddressed.

1980s and 1990s: The Impact of Regulatory Reform ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The 1980s were challenging times for consumers as governments across Canada, at all levels, struggled to put their fiscal houses in order. The concept of regulation was re-thought, because regulations were increasingly perceived as obstacles to the very economic and social well-being they were intended to secure.

The new environment forced the consumer movement to change its role significantly. From being active promoters of regulation, consumer organizations struggled to broaden their perspectives, and learned to become effective advocates in a number of non-regulatory processes created to address marketplace issues.

In 1993–94, seven of Canada's nine major consumer organizations received more than 50 percent of their total annual revenue from governments.

Consumer groups also sprung up to oversee and monitor newly competitive markets, with an eye to protecting the consumer interest through information and persuasion.

The structure of government was also changing. In June 1993, The Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs was dissolved, and the Competition Bureau and Office of Consumer Affairs joined Industry Canada. The Office remains responsible for funding consumer organizations. Provincial governments also

restructured and retrenched at this time.

In 1993–94, seven of Canada's nine major consumer organizations received more than 50 percent of their total annual revenue from governments. Since then, governments have dramatically reduced the amount they allocate to assist consumer groups. Provincial funding was also reduced, and in some cases completely eliminated. Organizations had to adjust quickly.

A New Approach ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

As the government approach changed, the marketplace itself evolved rapidly, becoming more complex and difficult to navigate. The Internet was born. Products and services multiplied and became more sophisticated and technologically complicated — along with their marketing.

The new environment placed a premium on information, for consumers and policymakers alike. To create sound policy, governments needed good advice, accurately reflecting and representing consumers.

Consumer organizations re-tooled themselves to provide that advice,



