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The Law of
CONSUMER PROTECTION
and
FAIR TRADING

Third edition

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The Law of Consumer Protection and Fair Trading

3rd Edition

by

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Preface

Recent years have seen a rapid increase in the volume of legislation to protect the consumer against not only fraud and dishonesty in commercial dealings but also against oppressive bargains and dangerous products. There is widespread public interest in 'consumerism' and an increasingly large number of professional and lay people are expected to be able to give advice on consumer problems and help to formulate consumer policy. Commercial litigation, at least as described in the leading textbooks on mercantile law, tends to be concerned primarily with disputes between business concerns, shipping companies and the like. There is a growing school of thought which holds that consumer protection law is at best only distantly related to commercial law, and it is legitimate as a separate exercise to focus on transactions between suppliers and the ultimate consumer. From that perspective it is fruitful to analyse the civil rights and duties and the criminal liabilities to which these transactions give rise.

What precisely should be covered by a comprehensive account of 'consumer protection law' is, as is the case with administrative law, for instance, the subject of legitimate debate. For present purposes we have looked at the body of law which exists to protect the private consumer from (a) unsafe products, (b) qualitatively deficient goods and services, (c) fraudulent, misleading or undesirable trading practices, (d) insufficient information, and (e) economic exploitation through lack of competition or excessive prices. To understand the working of the law it is also important to examine the voluntary or statutory provisions for giving the consumer redress when he has a legitimate complaint, whether it be against a nationalised industry or a producer of goods or services in the private sector. From this vast field we have necessarily had to be selective, particularly as to services. It could be argued, for instance, that the machinery regulating state welfare benefits is partly there to protect the consumer of these benefits, and certainly that public licensing systems relating to everything from taxi cabs to betting shops is an aspect of consumer protection. But the line has to be drawn somewhere, and the above topics are better dealt with in the specialist works that already exist. For this reason we have also ignored the protection

given to purchasers of land under section 76 of the Law of Property Act 1925 (implied covenants for title) since this is a specialist topic appropriately left to textbooks on Conveyancing, and the same considerations apply to the complex body of law protecting various types of tenant from eviction or payment of excessive rent. In many of these more technical areas the 'consumer in the street' will often rely on professional advice, and if matters go wrong his first line of attack will be against his professional adviser – an aspect of consumer protection fully dealt with in this book.

In the preface to the first edition of this book it was mentioned that when this book was originally written there was very little published work intended for practising lawyers, law students and trainee or qualified trading standards officers, treating the whole field in some depth. Since then a number of books have been produced and we seem to have moved from famine to abundance in a very short time. In addition the comparative absence of published material on the relationship between law and economics in this field no longer applies, and the burgeoning interest in this interdisciplinary field in the UK is encouraging. The original justification of the treatment of the social, political and (particularly) economic context of the laws and institutions concerning consumer protection in an introductory way was stated as being that 'many law students will not have studied economics before, and, with a few distinguished exceptions, authors of academic law books in England have given their readers little encouragement to think about the relationship between law and economics. Whilst extreme statements which would deny the study of law any normative role or intrinsic intellectual interest at all are to be deplored, a moment's thought will show that both parliamentary and judicial law-making rests on certain usually unexpressed economic or socio-political premises. Evaluation of a particular law's merits or demerits should not rest entirely on whether it appears to work well. It is also necessary to estimate the effect that any consumer protection law will have on, for instance, the economics of the production of the particular goods or services in question, and on consumer behaviour generally. It would be possible, given sufficient space, to deal with this wider dimension in far greater detail than we have done, but we have both kept it in mind and tried to deal with it in a way comprehensible to the person without any previous training in economics.'

In this edition the original sole author of the first and second editions, Brian Harvey, is delighted to have been joined by Deborah L. Parry, Lecturer in Law at the University of Hull. The results of this collaboration have been not only to make the huge task of integrating the many changes in case law and statute law into the original text much more bearable but also the correction of a large number of small slips. Whilst we have tried to preserve the integrity of

the original text as far as possible, in this edition it has for reasons of space been necessary to eliminate detailed treatment of a few topics comprised in the second edition. On the other hand the co-operation of our publishers enabled us to deal with the new and important provisions of the Consumer Protection Act 1987 affecting the former text and to provide what we hope will be a useful commentary on its main provisions. Accordingly, we have endeavoured to state the law as at 1 June 1987.

BRIAN W. HARVEY
DEBORAH L. PARRY
1 June 1987

Note
Commencement of the Consumer Protection Act 1987

The Secretary of State has announced that Part I of the Act (product liability) comes into force on 1 March 1988 and Part II (general safety requirement) comes into force on 1 October 1987.

Table of statutes and other legislation

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