

THE CONGRESSIONAL FRONT.  
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FOOTNOTE ON CONGRESS.

The legislative behaviour of members of Congress is an interesting thing to observe when general legislation of a controversial character, which is of interest to all sections and groups in the country, is pending for debate and action. In this behaviour one can see a basic pattern which should prove reassuring to the people. As this is written, Congress is considering a bill to extend the Price Control Act for one year. The bill is now in the amendment stage and scores of amendments have been introduced. They deal with every phase of price control and its administration and enforcement. Some amendments would remove price control on fish or fresh fruits and vegetables. Others would provide a new basis for setting prices for cotton goods. Others deal with business practices, with accounting, with enforcement, with administrative matters and with court review where a person has been charged with a violation of the Act. In all this, one can see a pattern.

THE FIRST THING ONE CAN SEE

is that every Member of Congress appreciates the need for price control under war conditions where the amount of spendable money in the public pocket is far in excess of the available supply of goods. If there is a single member of Congress who favors abandonment of price control his identity has not yet been disclosed. At this point, one might also observe that not a single responsible business man or business organization has asked that it be abandoned. In fact, they are insistent that for the duration, it should be retained because they know it will be of material aid in keeping inflationary forces in check.

THE SECOND THING ONE SEES

is a general protest against the inequities and hardships which have developed as a result of placing the whole complex business structure of the country in a kind of legislative straitjacket. Prior to the war prices were in the main regulated by supply and demand in a competitive system. The imposition of price control and rationing on such a system manifestly requires a multitude of rules and regulations for its operation and enforcement from which hardships have developed. In fact the record is fairly clear that a good many small business enterprises have been forced out of business as a result. Such hardships and inequities take the form of complaints to the lawmakers and if they are founded in fact, they finally take the form of amendments to remove such hardships where possible in the hope of making the law work more equitably.

THE THIRD THING ONE SEES

in the number and variety of amendments to restore the right of the citizen to his day in court, is our devotion to a court system in which any person, no matter how humble or how small his business may have a full and fair chance to have an impartial judge determine whether he is receiving fair treatment from his government. For 6000 years, the record of mankind is studded with efforts to roll back the abuses of power by government and out of it comes a system of courts to serve as impartial arbiters when controversies arise. In the original Price Control Act, courts were divested of jurisdiction to pass upon the validity of an order, regulation or price schedule and were in fact deprived of authority to issue a temporary restraining order in such a case, even though a citizen might show that he has been the victim of capricious treatment. These amendments will have thoro consideration.

THE FOURTH THING ONE SEES

is the growing conflict between economic objectives and the American system. The control of prices and the rationing of goods in time of war represents an economic objective on which there is general agreement. It is quite obvious that the enforcement and administration of that objective becomes rather difficult. The question then arises whether in achieving that objective, the civil freedom of the people shall be impaired to the point where they cannot have ready access to the courts. In 1942, that right of access to the courts was virtually destroyed except in a limited way. Now there is a growing demand that it be restored, even though it might make enforcement of price orders and schedules somewhat more difficult. The underlying reason is that it would be better to endure some abuses than to lose our appetite for freedom and the safeguards to freedom. All this is an interesting pattern.