**The Market Imperfections of Business, Shoppers and Consumerism: Esther Peterson and the legacies of the National Consumers’ League\***

**Abstract**: Esther Peterson’s long career in the consumer movement, White House and private sector, discloses much about organised consumerism, its politics and popular reception in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s. It also demonstrates the abiding influence of the National Consumers’ League, founded in 1899, on her understanding of markets, business, shoppers and strategies for reform. This article traces the relationship between Peterson’s thought and practice and that of the NCL. The idea that markets could be made to work more fairly if consumers had the knowledge to balance commercial power and the will to act was widespread in the 20th century consumer movement. Shopper agency could then be about more than self-interest and bring ethical reform to the wider society. It also identifies consumer activist’s recurring unease about shoppers’ aptitude for this role – their limited receptiveness to consumer movement initiatives and how they as well as business frustrated fair markets – and argues that this exposes a contradiction in the consumer movement’s own market-based approach and model of reform.

‘After Ralph Nader’, Lawrence Glickman’s history of consumer activism in the USA notes, Esther Peterson ‘was the leading consumer advocate of the postwar era… although she spent a good part… in the employ of the federal government and the Giant supermarket chain.’ Peterson was President Lyndon Johnson’s Special Assistant on Consumer Affairs (1964-67), a post she resumed as Director of the Office of Consumer Affairs until 1981 under President Jimmy Carter. From 1970-76 she was Consumer advisor to the supermarket chain, Giant and President of the National Consumers’ League (NCL), 1974-76. It is precisely this mix of government, voluntary, and private sectors that makes her story compelling and of use to historians. That Peterson slips across the usual chronologies and between the usual themes in consumer history also accounts for why Peterson is more a fleeting than sustained presence even in superior studies like Lizabeth Cohen’s and Glickman’s and despite what Glickman dubbed in 1999 a ‘revolution in the study of American consumer history’ that placed it centre stage in American historical narratives.[[1]](#endnote-1) Peterson’s role in government is well documented, but her time at Giant was no less significant. [[2]](#endnote-2) Schudson’s recent study offers a more integrated interpretation, contextualising Peterson as contributory to an emergent culture of transparency in politics, business, journalism, medicine, environmentalism, and education, that opened up established institutions and practices to public scrutiny. But Schudson ignores the longer-term consumer and political influences at work in Peterson.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This article focuses on those deeper influences, which it demonstrates were indebted to the NCL. Most consistently framed and mobilized by the NCL belief in ‘using our purchasing power to guide social policy’, Peterson’s vision was of a consumer movement that benefitted and engaged the whole of society. [[4]](#endnote-4) This emphasis on active consumers wielding their purchasing power for the social good was a particular strand in NCL thought – it was as apt to protect, regulate or legislate on consumers’ behalf. These two were not incompatible, but sometimes in tension. The focus of the article is to use Peterson’s career to explore her relationship with NCL ideology – how it conformed, diverged and deployed and re-worked it.

It ranges across the different sectors and periods of Peterson’s narrative – across Cohen’s three waves of the consumer movement (Progressive era, New Deal, post-war affluence) – to use her unique position to disclose its broader relevance for historians of consumerism.[[5]](#endnote-5) Seguing government, the (national and later, international) consumer movement and private retail sector, Peterson’s practices, engagements and frustrations afford historians an unparalleled vantage – into federal legislation and consumerism’s ideals, and across the long durée of modern US consumerism. But also onto the shopfloor and into the granular social history of the aisles and prosaic issues like labeling, developing Deutsch’s exposition of the grocery store as a key stage on which politics, gender, and citizenship were worked out.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Peterson was very much a “citizen-consumer” - a New Deal type public participant, that Cohen argues was under pressure from the more individual, private consumer fostered by business, advertising and free marketeers in post-war America. Amidst the diversity of contemporary, global consumer politics, Peterson’s story illustrates the strengths, weaknesses and plurality of consumerism’s trajectories in the 20th Century.[[7]](#endnote-7) In some ways she confounds the dominant narrative in her attempts to sustain and modernize the “citizen-consumer” after the New Deal and into Johnson’s Great Society and the challenging trading conditions of the 1970s. And in that it shows the model of aiming to make markets work for consumers long pre-dated the Cold War, when such politics became a patriotic necessity as the Soviet spectre outlawed more explicit critiques of capitalism. The recurring constraints and struggles Peterson encountered, the market shortcomings of business and shoppers, and the persistence in Peterson’s thought and practice of the NCL’ envisioning of how markets did and should work, the agency of shoppers and their potential for progressive reform, spread across Cohen’s “waves”. In other ways Peterson more conforms to Cohen, Glickman, Jacobs (and other historians) contention that Americans were reconciled to large-scale capitalism after the New Deal.[[8]](#endnote-8)

As Scroop has shown the long tradition of anti-monopolism in the populist anti-chain store movement of the 1920s and 1930s and its defence of small local community business, fed into the politics not only of the New Deal, but survived into the post-war, in later consumer spokesman like Estes Kefauver and Ralph Nader and turn-of-the-century anti-big box store protests.[[9]](#endnote-9) Likewise this article traces continuities across the century. But by contrast, evidently the NCL and Peterson’s market-model was not incompatible with big business, albeit Peterson faced some negotiation of this in her Giant guise. Peterson brings nuance and complexity to the narrative of reconciliation to capitalism after the New Deal. It also suggests that McGovern’s framing in *Sold American* of the economic but also cultural-political and representational battle between consumer advocates and business/advertising, over the *shared* terrain of mass consumption as integral to American nationality and citizenship, extended beyond 1945.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Even as the NCL faded organisationally from the 1930s, its model of shoppers using their market power resonated in a range of contexts: ethical and environmental consumerism, commodity and international boycotts, and campaigns against global sweatshops. As Sassoon has recently argued, consumer boycotts boomed as a transnational strategy for asserting human rights and fair trade in the 1970s, using rather than critiquing the market to highlight corporate abuses.[[11]](#endnote-11) But the strategy was not so new, if the global and post-imperial dimensions were. Indeed since the 2000s as new forms of global anti-consumerism have flourished, stoked by new horrors – notably the world’s deadliest garment factory fire at Rana Plaza in 2013 – it has become *du rigueur* to refer to the NCL’s origination of of such moral uses of consumer power.[[12]](#endnote-12) In its everyday and local formulations lay a more global and radical potential and model for reforming economic practice, albeit one that has been taken up by organisations other than the NCL.

This article then restores overlooked parts of Peterson’s story – chiefly at Giant and bringing in the historic influence of the NCL – to offer a more sustained analysis. Peterson’s biography is distinctive, but is primarily used here to explore the history of consumer activism in 20th century America and the persistence and afterlife of the NCL’s ethical and market philosophy after its early century heyday. It explores how Peterson negotiated and refurbished this in different contexts, and Peterson’s influence on wider consumer debates, but does not assert these were determinate or sole influences on the wider consumer movement or public policy. What is of interest is how the NCL’s legacy endured and how many of the strategic and philosophical tensions it experienced around market imperfections recurred in Peterson’s experiences and were evident in wider consumer movement language, practice and thinking. It also adds to historical work examining how markets have been imagined to operate.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The article’s structure is threefold. It explores the early NCL and the strands of thought and practice that influenced Peterson. It then discusses how she applied and had to negotiate these at the White House and Giant. Giant’s consumer-centred program was part of the broader experimentation in consumerism in the 1970s and ranks alongside radical retail models like consumer co-operatives, worker-owned partnerships, ethical stores or the NCL’s own short-lived store in 1900s New York.[[14]](#endnote-14) Since Giant ‘adopted many of the changes opposed by industry when Esther Peterson was the White House consumer adviser,’ her time at Giant can be interpreted as an application of her principles and vision just as much as her work in the consumer movement and federal government.[[15]](#endnote-15) Peterson’s 1960s and 1970s initiatives give historians a vantage from which to explore power relations between consumer movement aims, the state, politics and retail-corporate culture: to assess how radical Peterson’s agenda was or whether it was assimilated by the consumer society. Over the longer term we can analyse if consumerism’s belief that markets could be made to work more fairly was a strategic strength or its undoing. Consumerism was adept at pointing out the market deficiencies of business, but also the shortcomings of shoppers. The paradox was that as critics of the market, they also risked falling foul of it through their own market model of consumer-delivered social change.

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Peterson’s personal labor, consumer and women’s movement credentials linked the Great Society and New Deal, and drew in Progressive era NCL thinking. Born in 1906 and raised a Mormon, Peterson was radicalized by women’s garment workers strikes in the 1920s and summer schools in 1930s’ New England, meeting Colston Warne, later the leading figure in the Consumers’ Union, and joining the NCL, whose Board of Directors she later served on for 15 years. By 1938 she was an organiser for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers’ Union and from 1944 lobbied on behalf of the National Labor Relations Board. Esther and her husband Oliver, a labour attaché at the US embassies in Sweden and Belgium between 1948 and 1957 (and where the couple upset diplomatic protocol by shopping at Co-ops), were targets of McCarthyism and federal loyalty boards. Having campaigned for President Kennedy, Peterson headed the Women’s Bureau as one of the Assistant Secretaries in the Labor Department. She promoted the Equal Pay amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act, which saw the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibit sex discrimination in employment. Making good Kennedy’s 1962 Consumer Message – which pledged to support the consumer’s right to safety, to be informed, to choose and to be heard – and which Peterson regarded as ‘the Magna Carta for the consumer movement worldwide’, President Johnson made her his Special Assistant in 1964.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The abiding influence on Peterson’s principles and understanding of markets, consumers and progressive reform was the NCL. This was notwithstanding her lengthy attachment to the labour movement - for Peterson NCL principles were compatible with labour’s goals. Formed in 1899 and headed by Florence Kelley, the NCL forged a distinctive practice and consumer-centred understanding of market dynamics. To improve the conditions of industrial working-class life, it issued a white label for goods – mainly clothing, underwear - produced under safe, sanitary, well-paid labour conditions and white lists of retailers that sold such goods.[[17]](#endnote-17) The NCL was part of a wider women’s movement and of an International Conference of Consumer Leagues, but also focused on the factory and store shopfloor and the everyday activity of shoppers. Its onus on consumer responsibility and agency meant it valued the exercise of choice and knowledge in the marketplace.[[18]](#endnote-18) The label was a brand – it exploited the symbolic aspect of consumption for ethical ends. But the label was also, as Sklar notes, a ‘white, middle-class device’, philanthropic outreach by the better off, struggling to reach poorer consumers. Even so, as a model for activism and moral materialism it has echoed through a range of fair trade and transnational campaigns to the present. And it was this NCL model – particularly of active consumers fashioning the market, a strand sometimes in tension with more regulatory propensities - that Peterson applied in different contexts from the 1960s, in both its national and international visions, and its more quotidian uses, to remedy supermarket inequities.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Shoppers, armed with knowledge of goods and factories, were encouraged to exercise their market power accordingly, to reward the better manufacturers and stores and through competition to make better standards the market norm. ‘Recognising the fact that the majority of employers are virtually helpless to maintain a high standards as to hours, wages and working condition under the stress of competition unless sustained by the co-operation of consumers’, the NCL’s constitution explained, ‘the NCL proposes to educate public opinion… to direct its force as to promote better conditions among the workers.’[[20]](#endnote-20) Or as the NCL’s 1911 report expounded its own market philosophy and practice, acknowledging: ‘that business is a matter of supply and demand… the idea was to make demand for labelled goods so effective that sweatshops, child labor, and unsanitary conditions would be abolished.’[[21]](#endnote-21)

Kelley, who was close to Friedrich Engels and translated his work, saw the NCL as revealing the uncivilized nature of capitalism – either exposing its abuses or making ethical demands of it that it could not fulfill.[[22]](#endnote-22) Kelley saw the NCL’s method as a transitional program for capitalism, but there was nothing innately problematic about markets, competition or shopping in the NCL’s official vision or practice. As consumers were complicit in poor conditions, so they could turn this power to improve them. Markets could not only be a fair exchange between producers, retailers and consumers, competition could be an agent for ethical progress and wider social reform. Competition could be a race to the highest ethical standards – if consumers insisted – as well as a race to the bottom. Big business was not bad *per se*, except where scale impeded fair competition. Poor conditions or low wages were bad business and were the NCL’s quarry, with which it tore ethically, economically and politically into bad business practice**.**

Whilst efficiency and technology could bring value, low wages just made for cheapness – the NCL urged consumers to seek out the former, because the latter cost society more in terms of health and happiness. In this ideal vision – there was more an affinity than division between consumers and business, so long as the former could balance the power of the latter through knowledge of goods and readiness to act. And the League’s efforts to bring fairness and ethics to all sides of the market, meant it was good for business too. As the NCL put it when celebrating its 50th anniversary: ‘Manufacturers and businessmen have found that the reforms some of them once fought have helped them rather than hurt them. We live in a happier country because of the work the League has done.’[[23]](#endnote-23) The NCL encouraged good business practice, as Peterson would also, to make up for the shortcomings of consumers and to avoid state action as a substitute. Its determination to make markets work fairly meant as much as it tilted against corporate abuse, it was not automatically supportive of regulatory interventions. This was a recurrent tension for the NCL, as for Peterson at the White House and Giant. Some regulation might be good for business and consumers alike, taking the risks of both dishonest practices and anti-competitive aggregations of power out of the market - and the NCL lead the campaigns for the Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drug Acts of 1906. This regulatory, protective strand in the NCL fed into the New Deal. But a voluntary response by producers and sellers – in response to consumer wishes – was its ideal.

The label struggled after 1916 and was abandoned in 1918 after disputes with a rival union label and American Federation of Labor charges that the NCL label was being used by employers as a cloak to avoid union recognition – tarnishing the progressive appeal of the NCL’s brand. The NCL had an uneasy friendship with the labour movement. There were plenty of skeptics of capitalism in the NCL and it could give a puritan impression of thinking consumer-culture frivolous.[[24]](#endnote-24) But it was ultimately a variant of Veblen’s newly-coined “conspicuous consumption” – exhibiting not fancy packaging or ostentation but the use of its lists and display of its trademark labels – a show of information and knowledge for conscientious and socially responsible ends. Much as it tacitly boycotted non-“white” listed stores and labelled products, it also sought the support of good businesses and was possessed of a national vision of fair, harmonious markets. As Storrs titles her study, the NCL’s formal aim was *Civilizing Capitalism*.[[25]](#endnote-25) The ambiguities of the NCL outlook, and later Peterson’s, were apparent in: a stance that was both supportive and critical of business; recurrent debates about legislating on behalf of, or mobilizing consumers – wary of regulation, but with its desire for informed consumers unfulfilled and frustrating it into acceptance of regulation.

But the NCL’s methods had in any case met a mixed reception amongst shoppers. If big business was reluctant to co-operate in factory inspections and easily outweighed the League’s financial and personnel resources, so shoppers were perceived to have let the NCL down. The League reported some success as early as 1903, where the ‘growing commercial value of the label’ meant firms which ‘scorned to consider the use of the label two years ago, now offer to change their arrangements to secure the privilege of using it.’ Larger retailers were keen to win a place on the White List. Some high-profile department stores, like Macy’s and Wanamaker’s, used it as a marketing ploy to advertise good standards of employment and stock. This was quite at one with the NCL’s vision of uplifting competition. But it equally found competition, particularly as war approached, could destroy voluntary agreements or industry-wide protocols on standards, hours and pay.[[26]](#endnote-26)

NCL argot was full of invocations of consumer responsibility and faith in activism. Kelley in 1900 talked of ‘our never ending task so long as there remains one careless purchaser or one unlabeled garment.’ Yet even these often contained a market imperative. The struggle in ‘making each purchase of the consumer a protest against these evils’ was uphill, but as the NCL’s 1912 report concluded: ‘if the only flaw in the chain is that “people do not ask”’ about the label, ‘then our modest results should not discourage us, but should incite us to do our part with the same business zeal shown by factory and store.’[[27]](#endnote-27) But that people did not ask was quite a flaw and recurring NCL experience and grievance – and something Peterson would encounter later in the century.

The Washington DC League’s 1911-13 report told of ‘constant and increasing demand for the label’, but by 1915-16 demand was ‘more spasmodic’ and the League concluded: ‘as a community we do not yet realize that with each purchase of articles with the label we cast our vote for good conditions in the industry, whereas where we do not demand the label, we tacitly give our approval to bad conditions.’[[28]](#endnote-28) Other initiatives struggled too. A mail order service - a NCL version of the Sears catalog - operated with leading Philadelphia store, Strawbridge and Clothier, ‘failed’ and was reckoned would ‘not succeed until each state league has made its cause dear to the isolated women who shops through mail service.’[[29]](#endnote-29) In 1911 the NCL opened its own store at 4 West 28th Street in New York City. It stocked only NCL or union label goods, offering ‘the assurance that every article is made under fair conditions.’ But after two years it was reported, ‘the label shop is valiantly struggling to arouse the apathetic shopping public of New York City.’[[30]](#endnote-30) The imperfections in the market were not only due to business, the NCL concluded, but consumers too.

After 1918 the NCL focused less on mobilizing consumers (although it continued to issue white lists of candy and to campaign against long shop hours) than on legal and legislative regulation to help consumers and workers. It had always campaigned for legal minimums on wages and maximums on hours and lead the case for the Supreme Court to uphold Oregon’s 10 hour law in 1908. The NCL contributed to the New Deal, notably through Frances Perkins, who served as Roosevelt’s Labor Secretary throughout and had been the League’s New York Secretary as long ago as 1911, the year of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Legislation like the Fair Labor Standards Act, National Recovery Administration’s product and store labeling, and the ethos of business in a compact with society were recognisably NCL-style approaches and saw it merge with the machinery of the state and the Democratic Party.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The NCL aim of righting the market meant applying countervailing power to underpowered groups and acknowledging consumers as citizens – a classically New Deal vision. Given the NCL’s own meagre resources it could hardly resist state support – indeed as a source of authority for labeling it welcomed it – but there remained a tension with a more voluntary compact between business and consumer.

The NCL’s coverage of commodities, stores and its membership were never extensive. It peaked at 15000 members, and by 1911 sixty-nine factories had earned the right to use the label. In Washington, the League had 529 members by 1915 and eight department stores carried labelled goods.[[32]](#endnote-32) It struggled to maintain, not to mention publicize or expand or get the public to use the label and lists. But its citizen-consumer model and ethos was influential and evident in the New Deal. If also in its concern, often communicated as criticism, that shoppers were not just exploited, but failing in their responsibilities, not up to the task, dupes of advertising and big business, nothing less than its *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs*, as Frederick Schlink and Arthur Kallett’s 1933 bestselling book both warned and judged them. In *Your Money’s Worth* (1927) Schlink and Stuart Chase had presented the consumer as ignorant of ever-more complex goods, bilked by advertisers, and without standardized weights, measures or other data, destined to have their consuming pleasures undermined. Schlink, Kallett, Chase and their books were driving forces behind what would become the Consumers’ Union by 1936, whose early years echoed the NCL in reporting the labor conditions of the products it tested in *Consumer Reports*. [[33]](#endnote-33)

Peterson joined the NCL in the New Deal era and worked for the New Deal-created National Labor Relations Board from 1944. Peterson’s consumer career contained many of the tensions between state action, support for progressive business and consumer mobilization that the NCL encountered before and during the New Deal. By the time she became NCL President in 1974 it was a much-diminished organisation. Peterson said she’d rather close the NCL than see it limp on in financial peril. She managed to juggle its anti-corporate rhetoric and involvement of ‘Nader raider’ Jim Turner, with appeals to ‘forward-looking’ corporations and a seventy-fifth anniversary banquet.[[34]](#endnote-34) Peterson celebrated how, ‘the NCL for three quarters of a century has been dedicated to making the consumer a determinate force in the marketplace – eliminating exploitation of consumers and workers alike.’ The League re-launched with a national plan, *The Assertive Consumer*, training thousands of local organisers. By 1981 its budget had increased twenty-fold from 1976.[[35]](#endnote-35)

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By the 1960s Peterson was an important voice in a revived US consumer movement that was itself part of a wider social upheaval that produced abundant critiques of consumer culture. Ralph Nader (whose *Unsafe at any Speed* was published in 1965, a year after Peterson’s appointment as Presidential Special Assistant) was the leading name. If Nader was a legal militant looking to influence legislation; Peterson was a more emollient insider, looking to popular sentiment besides the law. A variety of radical consumer agendas were available. As Horowitz shows, it also made public figures of Rachel Carson, Vance Packard, Paul Ehrlich, Betty Friedan, Michael Harrington, and a range of others that Horowitz details. One study that Horowitz omits, despite its public impact, David Caplovitz’s *The Poor Pay More* (1963), was given by Peterson as a gift to President Johnson. And there were other lawmakers – Gaylord Nelson and Warren Magnusson as environmental campaigners, Philip Hart on consumer affairs – at large in the Senate.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Federal, state, city and voluntary education initiatives proliferated. The Consumer Assembly of 1966 lead to the formation of the Consumers Federation of America (CFA) to co-ordinate activities. Diverse as this activity was, most subscribed to the market as a basically democratic sphere, corrupted by business and advertising – in short a vision that resonated with that of the NCL’s founders. The largest organisation, the Consumers Union (CU), was a fixture of middle-class, affluent American life. Anxious to purge any Cold War ‘red’ charges the CU had long ended its interest in labour conditions and presented itself as the real proponent of free choice. It remained a watchdog of business mal-practice, but targeted at consumers looking to help themselves through good value as much as the wider society. Its founding prudent, ethical tone had become increasingly attuned to the acquisitive consumer by the 1950s.[[37]](#endnote-37) Yet more radical groups also pressed a market philosophy. Ehrlich, with Roy Kiesling, set up the Consumer Alliance to lobby for safety and full disclosure labeling in 1970. Their Declaration of Consumer Rights pushed an environmental agenda and activist approach, feeling Nader and the CU’s activities were too remote from popular involvement. The Alliance asserted a familiar mantra, albeit more forcefully: ‘Our real power is in the marketplace. Through Consumer Alliance we are going to learn to use that power. We are going to tell American industry face-to-face what we want them to do differently.’[[38]](#endnote-38)

What had been a single federal program under Kennedy in 1962, the Consumers Advisory Council (which Johnson replaced with the Presidential Committee on Consumer Interests, PCCI), numbered twenty-six when Peterson re-entered the White House in 1977. In 1966 the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples’ 1800 local units developed consumer protection programs. [[39]](#endnote-39) As Horowitz makes clear civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King saw consumer politics as an integral part of their vision. And in retail itself, ‘consumer advisors’ flourished.[[40]](#endnote-40) Women were prominent voices of consumer knowledge: Peterson, Virginia Knauer (Nixon and Reagan’s Special Assistant), Betty Furness (the actress and TV personality who Johnson replaced Peterson with, not that she turned out to be the ‘probusiness cipher’ Johnson anticipated) and Bess Myerson Grant (and like Furness a former product promoter) who was Commissioner of the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs. The gendering of consumerism was an aspect of Peterson’s experience and representation.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Consumerism fed legislatively into the Great Society in the Fair Packaging and Labeling (1966), Truth-in-Lending (1968) Acts and a National Commission on Product Safety from 1967. Democratic Michigan Senator Philip Hart was a driving force behind the packaging legislation. Hearings had started in 1961 and Hart succeeded the fiery Estes Kefauver as chair of the Senate Antitrust and Monopoly Subcommittee in 1963. Kefauver had been a noted critic of big business and had made the first attempt to introduce a federal Consumer Protection Agency (CPA) in 1959. Hart’s beef was more deceptive, exploitative, even sharp practice by certain sectors of manufacturing, retail and marketing – elaborate packaging, but uninformative labeling or weights that made value calculations complex for shoppers. To judge by corporate resistance, claims that re-packaging would mean price rises, accusations of government interference and of patronising the consumer, Fair Packaging was no mean legislative achievement when it finally passed in 1966. Charles Mortimer of General Foods urged Congress to ‘keep politics out of the pantry’ and charged Peterson and other consumer advocates with threatening free enterprise. But the aim was, as ever, to make the marketplace fair or fairer. Hart, whose liberal and easy manner belied a steely determination (like Peterson’s), grilled corporate producers on their non-standardized packet weights (like 12 ¾ oz. laundry powder). Amongst those testifying was motivational researcher Ernest Dichter, who reckoned shoppers discounted just short of half of the hyperbole forwarded in advertising, but that they were still, therefore, more likely to buy canned peaches labelled ‘gorgeous’ over those marked ‘good.’[[42]](#endnote-42)

Peterson remained a fixture in the wider consumer movement whilst working for the White House, speaking regularly and widely around the nation. State level and local action remained a focus. She applied and revived the NCL ethos that without local public pressure, federal and legal efforts were insufficient, just as much as she told the Vermont Consumers Day in 1965, ‘one lone individual can do little.’ At the 1969 Consumer Assembly she noted how ‘consumer action’ was ‘often taken on the consumer’s behalf rather than through his own involved participation’ and willed states and on-the-ground organisations to keep up their ‘countervailing force.’ Opponents of federal reform, after all, had a ‘determined lobbying campaign’ from business behind them and that which had sought ‘to defeat the packaging bill’ was ‘one of the smoothest, most powerful I have come across.’ In any case, ‘all the problems on Main Street cannot be resolved on Pennsylvania Avenue’ she told Michigan’s state legislature in 1966.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Again very much in the NCL tradition, much of Peterson’s rhetoric and practice was about ensuring a fairer functioning of a free market that was under constant attack from deceptive and confusing packaging and the language of advertising. These undermined the relationship and trust between shopper, product and retailer. As an example of this, she listed to the 1966 Consumer Assembly, the differing sizes of olives that were available: jumbo, giant, mammoth, colossal, extra large, super colossal and special super colossal.[[44]](#endnote-44)

A fair market was in the mutual interests of shoppers and business. The two shared a basic affinity – thus Peterson regularly addressed business groups. As she explained to the Texas Wholesale Grocers Association in 1966: ‘I will try to put you in the consumer’s shoes, just as I try to put the consumer in your shoes when I talk to consumer groups.’ Supermarket shelves had five times the range of products they had 20 years ago: ‘I often see shopper’s pause, hesitate, and look puzzled while trying to make comparative choices. In the detergent aisle of a typical supermarket, there may be 49 different product choices, in a range of 28 different package weights from 13oz to 20lbs and ‘even if a shopper could figure out the best buy in dollars and cents, she still has to evaluate the advertised claims and counter-claims.’ And ‘since the shopper many times is not quite sure what the ingredients and materials are… she is at a loss.’[[45]](#endnote-45)

Peterson lamented in testimony to Congress on the Fair Packaging Bill in 1966 the advent of multiple brand lines and self-service: ‘No longer do we have the informed clerk and the solicitous proprietor to answer our questions. The label on the package is frequently the sole source available to tell us.’ Part of the responsibility was for shoppers to equip themselves with knowledge, but also for this to be accessible and trustworthy. Shoppers were neither exploited pawns (as critics of advertising alleged), nor rational and self-determining (as free marketeers contended). Housewives were ‘in the ring with the pros, and want to be well enough prepared to make it a fair match.’ Besides the competitive, confrontational even, analogy what can be detected here was Peterson’s frustration (echoing the NCL) with the limits to informed consumers as much as less-than-forthright businesses, that meant regulation might have to intervene. Regulation could be and was best avoided, she sought to reassure the American Marketing Association the same year, by good practice among business. Here she cited and sided with David Ogilvy (advertising executive and author of the 1963 bestseller, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*) that informative advertising could sell perfectly well.[[46]](#endnote-46)

When Peterson became Johnson’s Special Assistant in 1964 then, she envisaged her office re-balancing the market in consumer’s favor. The expanded range by then on offer in the average supermarket meant consumers had to make ‘more decisions in a more impersonal marketplace’. Countering Republican charges of a federal ‘power grab’, Peterson forwarded a moral and economic agenda that echoed both Johnson’s Great Society and the NCL’s belief in the power of consumer choice for shaping society.[[47]](#endnote-47) She often cited President Johnson’s 1964 Special Message to the Congress on Consumer Interests to explain how her program would ‘pursue the excellent and reject the tawdry… in every aspect of American life.’[[48]](#endnote-48) Her 1967 PCCI report to Johnson argued:

What American families do with their money… determines the material shape of American Society… The excellent and the tawdry are on sale today… If, over the next decades, the American society becomes the great society, their choices will have done much to make it so… Expressions of taste have to be based on knowledge of quality, quantity, durability, performance, cost… With this knowledge, the American consumer can choose well.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Johnson seemed to have made an adroit move when on Peterson’s appointment correspondence flooded into the White House for her. The NCL had celebrated her appointment with a certificate attesting to her ‘deceptive packaging of high legislative, political and administrative ability’ and for ‘giving short weight in the scales of government to those who would coerce, mislead, underpay, overcharge or otherwise exploit their fellowmen.’ But Peterson herself soon felt ‘duped in a major consumer fraud’. Johnson’s advisor Jack Valenti and Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joe Califano were better at relaying business discontent with Peterson than her concerns to the President. Peterson complained that she and her agenda were subject to sexism, of limited access to the President, that Johnson did not attend the PCCI, and that she was not consulted on the Packaging Bill. With just one assistant and expected to continue her Labour Department role, she was a ‘political instrument’, a front person to give the pretence of interest, ‘rather than a real instrument for consumer action’.[[50]](#endnote-50)

A flashpoint between Peterson and Johnson came during supermarket boycotts late in 1966 against price rises and sales gimmicks like stamps and bingo. Republicans blamed inflation on federal spending; Democrats countered it was an industry issue; housewives blamed supermarkets; supermarkets blamed producers; and the Super Market Institute alleged housewives who ‘were not ready to listen’ to their explanations for inflation bore responsibility. The amicable marketplace of white middle class housewives told they were sovereign by retailers was shattered as protests sprang up in more than 100 cities, independent of organised consumerism and with media-savvy acronym-friendly titles like Housewives for Enacting Lower Prices (HELP).[[51]](#endnote-51) In Denver they were dismissed by some local chain stores as ‘a herd of sheep’ who did not earn the money they spent on food. Peterson’s office took no official position, but was in the forefront of media coverage, especially when she was pictured embracing the leaders of the highest-profile protest in Denver and told the *New York Times* she felt it was ‘beautiful that the gals are waking up.’ This was the constituency Peterson’s post as Consumer advisor was supposed to appeal to - but at the ballot box not in boycott actions. [[52]](#endnote-52)

Dubbed ‘ladycotts’ in the media, this showed the ‘other 1960s’ of white, American suburbia, simmering with discontents.[[53]](#endnote-53) But Peterson was also critical of shoppers. She advised buying chicken instead of pricier beef and suggested to the *New York Daily Post* that the problem was ‘many women don’t know how to shop’. Peterson claimed the protests forced ‘the large, impersonal chain store operations to improve their public relations’ and to explain their pricing regimes, but she was presented by the press and perceived by the White House Administration as supporting consumers against business.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Advertising also brought Peterson and the Administration into conflict. Valenti was an ex-advertising executive, whereas Peterson thought advertising ‘respectable humbug’. With the Fair Packaging legislation before Congress, advertising journal *Printer’s Ink* (a longstanding critic of the consumer movement) asked of Peterson, ‘is she ignorant?’ and ‘does the President know what she is doing?’ When the Advertising Federation of America - who, quoting *Printer’s Ink*, described Peterson as ‘the most pernicious threat to advertising today’ - invited Johnson to their Convention, she told him she felt accepting ‘would pull the rug from under your consumer program’.[[55]](#endnote-55) Peterson’s unease about advertising was widespread in the 1960s, but was a stance held since at least the 1930s by the consumer movement of Chase and Schlink - and one that in the malign power it ascribed to advertising tended to assume and despair of the apathy or malleability of consumers.

Peterson visited J Walter Thompson’s (JWT) New York office in 1965. This was Peterson’s first visit to an ad agency and JWT was the world’s largest. They treated her to presentations on their activities, job opportunities for women and discussed advertising in general and the particular issues of packaging and labeling. Peterson talked of ‘the beginning of some very good two-way communication’, but the frostiness of JWT’s account of Peterson’s ‘public comments on the relationship between the interests of the consumer and the objectives of advertising’ that had ‘attracted the interest of many leaders of the advertising business’ was apparent in such tersely diplomatic language.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Peterson’s eventual political demise and resignation early in 1967, *Advertising Age* reckoned, was because her ‘instructions were to project a pro-consumer image for the administration’, but ‘she had yet to find a way to accomplish this without setting off alarms on the business front.’ Indeed Administration reports were wary of consumerism’s ‘inability to reach and affect the general public’ and thus the ‘political strategists decided that there is little… consumer vote’.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Peterson refuted this. The advertising fracas and supermarket boycotts demonstrated the ‘new awareness of… Americans that they have rights and responsibilities as consumers, just as they do as voters or wage earners or producers.’ Noting how some ‘economists have argued the consumer ‘votes’ each time he makes a purchase,’ Peterson welcomed the housewives’ protests as evidence of the consumer’s ‘more direct participation in the economy.’ The protests, moreover, heightened business ‘awareness of consumer dissatisfaction and led to stronger efforts to explain the industry’s problems.’ The 1967 PCCI report duly noted business efforts on this front.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Peterson returned to the Labor Department. But the President wanted to maintain consumer support. He moved quickly to appoint Betty Furness as Peterson’s replacement as special assistant for consumer affairs in March 1967 and addressed the CFA’s Consumer Assembly that November, proclaiming ‘a consumer’s administration.’ When Furness succeeded Peterson, *Consumer Reports* lamented the loss of a ‘true specialist’ with a concrete philosophy’ of a ‘consumer-directed economy’ with a ‘specialist in the art of selling’, most recently for Westinghouse goods.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Peterson’s fraught tenure in office evinces Storrs’ argument that 1930s New Deal radicalism became moderated in the face of attacks on the post-war consumer movement. Meg Jacobs has noted an additional fracturing of the consumer and labor movements in this period. Nader’s more legal strategy marked a shift away from any remnants of New Deal-style fusion of radical labor and consumer politics.[[60]](#endnote-60) Evidence of this was also to be found when Peterson left the government early in 1969 and returned to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers’ Union as its legislative representative and lobbyist. The union was not interested in her consumer strategies. She regarded this as a missed opportunity and a reason why she accepted the offer in 1970 from the Giant supermarket chain to become their Consumer Advisor.[[61]](#endnote-61)

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The move to Giant was not incongruous for Peterson. Giant wore its liberal politics openly and Peterson saw an opportunity to apply her progressive philosophy. The NCL essence of this - building dialogue and trust between retailer and shopper – promised competitive benefits to Giant as well as appealing to its politics. Giant opened Washington’s first supermarket in 1936 and ran stores in Virginia and Maryland. Paul Forbes (head of Public Affairs) met Peterson at a Johnson inaugural ball, for which Giant supplied a cake. Forbes confessed, ‘I envy you the opportunity you had to serve the new frontier and now the great society.’ Giant was not unscathed by the violent protests in Washington that followed Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968. Giant had stores in the city’s poorer neighbourhoods, but Betty Furness (Peterson’s replacement) and others noted that Safeway’s reputation for price gouging made it more of a target. Giant’s 14th Street store, with the help of Giant’s first black manager, Mark Masterson, was spared. After the riots, Giant President, Joseph Danzansky, chaired the Urban Coalition’s Emergency Food Committee in Washington.[[62]](#endnote-62)

But retailers and consumer activists alike speculated Peterson might revise her opinions now she had swapped sides. As Danzansky put it, the ‘consumer thought she had sold out, whilst the executives thought she would keep them from selling out.’ Jack Lehrman (Giant’s co-founder) told her, ‘the sooner you get out of here, the better.’ But in Peterson’s vision there were no sides to swap: her reform agenda, consumer and business interests were compatible; retail could be a neutral meeting place of producer and consumer. If such beliefs were a prerequisite or justification for taking the job, Peterson scarcely reflected on any tensions or limits to her vision. She kept an arms-length relationship to management, determined to be an ‘ambassador to the company *for* the consumer, not the ambassador of the company *to* the consumer’. She did not join the Society of Consumer Professionals (‘people who knew their bread was buttered by the big corporations’), took no Giant stock, and remained active in the consumer movement. In 1973, while working for Giant, she was elected NCL President.[[63]](#endnote-63)

For Peterson this was all part of an ongoing political project. As the NCL explained in 1974: ‘Watergate and inflated supermarket prices have the same root: a few people or organizations… have bought a corner of the marketplace.’ Whilst still at Giant, she participated in Democrat Party study groups, convinced that, *pace* the Johnson White House’s rationalization of her dismissal, that the consumer agenda was ‘closer to the public interest than any other category of political issues.’[[64]](#endnote-64)

Criticizing Republicans as un-patriotic, she warned if government only supported business ‘free market balance is destroyed, quality is lowered, prices run wild…. Only a free market economy – involving consumer/buyers and producer/sellers of equal political and economic strength – can turn this tide’. This meant both support for a Federal Consumer Protection Agency (CPA) and recognition that ‘a growing proportion of business is creating a new climate of social accountability’. The simultaneous demand for a federal agency whilst extolling good business practice was not a contradiction Peterson admitted or confronted – although she saw the former as a transitional method of stimulating latent potential for the latter. If this position was because of doubts about the robustness of the consumer-centred model for tempering corporate power, Peterson did not say so publically. As in the turn-of-the century NCL, the New Deal and the 1960s White House – the balance to be struck between business, consumers and the state was a delicate one. Her critics saw this more sinisterly as the threat of using federal force to coral business. Supporters like Carter advisors Stuart Eizenstat and Mike Pertschuk (who Carter appointed to head the Federal Trade Commission) saw it as distinguishing Peterson from those consumer activists and Democrats who mistrusted business.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Driving Peterson’s Giant agenda was a Consumer Advisory Committee of teachers, home economists and nutritionists. The Committee piloted initiatives on unit pricing (to explain different weights or sizes on sale by pricing per single measure), barcoding, open dating of products, nutritional labeling and education. They employed Howard University laboratories and interns; touted bussing from poorer communities to big suburban stores; introduced recyclable products, a Senior Citizen Committee, in-store ‘Pester Esther’ forms, radio shows, and newsletters.[[66]](#endnote-66) They also abolished trading Stamps, a longstanding bugbear of Peterson’s. For Peterson and consumer activists trading stamps were parasitic on both shoppers and retailers – a means of buying consumer loyalty rather than earning it through good practice. In 1968 Blue Chip stamps, the most popular trading stamps in Nevada and California and clients of JWT - with whom Peterson had a history – became embroiled in an advertising battle with supermarket chains over whether stamps inflated prices. JWT used press and TV ads to back its client.[[67]](#endnote-67)

Giant adapted from Kennedy a ‘Consumer Bill of Rights’ promising the right to safety, to be informed, to choose and be heard - and adding in the right to redress and service. Unit pricing, bar coding and computer checkouts fulfilled the consumer’s right to be informed by providing detailed till receipts and enabling comparative shopping (a key demand of consumer reformers to back-up the truth-in-packaging legislation). They reduced human pricing errors. Open dating informed shoppers when products had been packed or displayed. These initiatives included an agreement with unions to avoid job losses resulting from technological efficiencies. Rather, Giant and Peterson held out the prospect that, if adopted industry-wide, they would create employment.[[68]](#endnote-68)

Peterson called on the expertise of her many networks, such as Dr. Arnold Elkin, Chair of the Consumer Product Safety Commission. On nutritional labeling, she consulted Dr. Jean Mayer (Chair of the White House Conference on food, nutrition and health), Jim Turner, one of “Nader’s Raiders” and author of *The Chemical Feast* (an expose of food safety and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)), and the FDA. Danzansky sold the nutritional initiative to food producers and packagers who were wary of Peterson and uncertain they had the requisite data, on the grounds (and in a familiar consumerist vocabulary) that Giant could ‘be the guinea pig for the industry.’[[69]](#endnote-69)

The 1970s were testing times for innovation and many of the challenges Peterson’s initiatives faced were different in kind, even if the questions of shopper participation, business practice and enforcement that they raised, resonated with older concerns of consumer reformers. Indeed Peterson had to grapple strategically with the same issue of shopper indifference, business hostility and the dilemmas of how to implement change that the NCL had encountered. 1970s’ Inflation posed problems for unit pricing. Giant’s competitor, Safeway, announced when prices changed, but lower price stock remained on shelves. Giant resisted following suit, concerned that smaller stores would have to put prices up first and explained why transport and labor inflation meant mark-ups on existing stock. But in 1974 it backed down, even re-introducing discount stamps. ‘We aren’t taking this step because we think it is right’, the company conceded, but because ‘we must bow to realities of marketplace’, at least (in a telling phrase), ‘until consumers become sufficiently knowledgeable to separate real from counterfeit consumerism’.[[70]](#endnote-70)

Equally, inflation was a stimulus to barcoding. The first barcode transaction using a Universal Product Code took place in June 1974 at a Marsh Supermarket in Ohio. Inflation negated the value of pre-printing prices on goods (though many shoppers favored this, as Marsh’s Director of Research acknowledged) and was labor-saving of price ticketing. [[71]](#endnote-71) Giant insisted to Virginia’s General Law Committee this was a market not legislative issue: ‘Consumers will cast their $ votes… but before legislation is considered, let’s give computer-assisted checkouts a chance to develop’. Some consumer activists worried that tests on such technology were only tests of the machinery, not of the consumer experience.[[72]](#endnote-72)

Such developments became norms, but were achieved despite industry scepticism, shoppers’ indifference and resistance within Giant itself. The ‘roof fell in’ when Gerson Barnett, head of grocery, discovered all policy changes were subject to Peterson’s approval. Open dating, he feared, would see shoppers messing up displays looking for newer produce. Unit pricing required shelving re-design. Giant’s schemes generated FDA interest, allowing Giant to allay fears over barcode scanners by assuring shoppers their safety and accuracy was being checked by the FDA. The FDA also monitored nutritional labeling, in 1972 finding 62.4% of shoppers aware and 85% of those wanting it extended.[[73]](#endnote-73)

But there were problems with Unit Pricing. Peterson asked the Consumer Advisory Committee for ideas to convey their uses ‘to a low-income, non-reading, non-mathematical group’. Engaging poorer consumer was, as often for consumer reformers, a challenge.[[74]](#endnote-74) A 1975 survey found 92.5% could identify prices, 48% kept their sales receipt and of these 30% compared prices. This picture of a minority using this information and comparatively shopping emerged in other surveys. Shoppers, it was concluded, needed time ‘to learn the new method’.[[75]](#endnote-75) Even if only 20% looked at labels (a figure Peterson doubted) that did not undermine their value: many didn’t vote, Peterson reasoned (applying her market model beyond commerce to politics), but that was no reason to end elections.[[76]](#endnote-76)

When unit pricing replaced individual pricing it was assumed this was tribute to the trust Giant had built up with its shoppers, but disquiet was persistent.[[77]](#endnote-77) A grandmother and regular Giant shopper in 1975 declared herself ‘against any form of pricing that takes the price directly off the merchandise.’ She disliked Peterson’s ‘shop elsewhere if-you-want’ philosophy, which she felt was ‘thumbing a nose at shoppers’. Detailed labels showed shops want us kept ‘in a maze’.[[78]](#endnote-78) Peterson’s aim was the opposite - a risk-reducing guide to shopping that, for instance, decoded fancy advertising language. Such language was a recurring gripe of Peterson’s. ‘Misinformation and misunderstanding tend to stir ill will towards the responsible as well as irresponsible businessman’ she had told the 1st Consumer Assembly in DC in 1966: ‘In the long run, the strength of the free enterprise system itself depends on how well it communicates with the buying public.’ Instead of ‘fancy’ fish, why not say ‘previously frozen.’ But its demands on shoppers’ knowledge led to Peterson’s schemes being accused of ‘taking the romance out of shopping’.[[79]](#endnote-79)

Peterson, it was true, was not a born shopper. ‘My forays into supermarkets have always been as short as I could make them’ she admitted on a trip to a new suburban branch of King Soopers in Denver in 1970. Instead she nostalgically longed for ‘the butchers, bakers… who wouldn’t dream of… wrapping cellophane around a loaf of bread.’ Peterson often lamented how when she was growing up in Utah, they were more self-sufficient: ‘but we did know the grocer… he served us personally and was able to answer any problem or complaint.’ Peterson (like Hart, Schudson notes) was prone to nostalgia for the days before self-service and the cornucopia offered by supermarkets, when a shopkeeper was known personally to the shopper. Now shoppers had to trust the label. But at Giant, when Peterson was appointed people followed this reluctant shopper and her trolley around. Peterson had fostered a skepticism of shopping as a risky business (as had books like *The Supermarket Trap*) that she now looked to overturn in asking shoppers to trust her schemes.[[80]](#endnote-80)

Giant marketed their program aggressively - part of consumers’ right to be informed - often featuring Peterson. Her grandmotherly integrity was a marketing gift – a public face for Giant. This was not without irony, given her White House run-in with the advertising industry. Peterson’s position was that there was nothing structurally at fault with advertising (as with markets) - it was its content that counted (shown by her endorsement of Ogilvy’s case for informative advertising). In ethos this sat uneasily with the early NCL, but even they had been savvy at winning vivid newspaper support for campaigns against long shop hours. During 1972’s inflation, a Giant ad showed Peterson suggesting a solution for high Beef prices was for shoppers to ‘buy something else’ (such as lentils and dried beans, protein-rich alternatives). This won a *Family Circle*–Super Market Institute award, and annoyed the beef industry. In 1975 the Advertising Club of Metropolitan Washington made Peterson their ‘Advertising Woman of the Year’.[[81]](#endnote-81)

Peterson resisted any implication she was compromising with commercial practices and values, but either way the company sought commercial and competitive advantage. Peterson’s subtly-crafted corporate-sceptic, pro-shopper identity was an asset for Giant, something she neither refuted nor questioned. Giant saw her initiatives as competitive tools. Even when they came to little, ads made a merit of their effort; Peterson was their unique selling point. Many initiatives more than broke even and won Giant management to the cause. Unit pricing paid for itself (productivity gains from not having to price-ticket items offset start-up costs); open dating aided stock rotation and Giant’s own brand sales (since some brands would not comply); and nutritional information, for example, increased broccoli sales.[[82]](#endnote-82)

In Washington, where supermarkets were engaged in ‘the country’s most gruelling struggle for market domination’, this added up to a vital advantage over Safeway.[[83]](#endnote-83) Peterson justified it as setting standards competitors would have to follow –and unit pricing rapidly spread, partly through fear it would be made statutory. But as often she sprang to a competitive or partisan defence of Giant. As Safeway had consulted Nader on nutritional labeling, Peterson felt it ‘important that we move expeditiously’, to secure Giant the credit.[[84]](#endnote-84) She defended Giant in 1971 when the Price Commission of Economic Stabilization found it had exceeded a price cap. Peterson alleged the violation was technical and nothing to besmirch shopper’s trust. In 1972 she told a disgruntled shopper she was right to be ‘upset with the big increases in food prices… but we have very little control over them’ and had not passed them on for longer than competitors.[[85]](#endnote-85)

Her first full year, 1972, as she explained in the *Harvard Business Review*, saw record Giant sales. Peterson-style consumerism was of value to the shared interests of shoppers and retailers, true to Peterson’s NCL roots. Danzansky told the 1972 Super Market Institute Conference, ‘everything she’s touched has turned to gold’ and proposed, ‘let’s call in the Ralph Naders and Esther Petersons.’ This was met with boos, but Danzansky saw the ‘real promise of voluntary consumer reform’ which was ‘preferable to the… deadening effect of regulatory legislation.’[[86]](#endnote-86)

And porous political boundaries or breaking down assumptions of the antagonism of the marketplace was a theme in this period. In 1970 management consultant Peter Drucker told business leaders they should not resist all consumer laws from the government, to do so was to cause market friction and fuel those who wanted more regulation.[[87]](#endnote-87) It must have seemed the consumer movement and NCL principles had triumphed when even President Nixon sent a special consumer message to Congress in 1969, and started it by referencing Rachel Carson and Upton Sinclair.[[88]](#endnote-88) But business and New Right opposition to the consumer movement was gathering. And in this regard it was significant that the belief in the market was as rife amongst progressive consumerists – a feature not only of the US, as historians of the social democratic impetus to create rational consumers and democratize the marketplace by the likes of Michael Young in the UK consumer movement have shown[[89]](#endnote-89) - as anywhere else on the political spectrum.

Peterson saw herself as ‘the guardian of the gullible’ since, as Giant’s *Consumer Guide to*… leaflets put it, ‘shopping in today’s abundant and complicated marketplace is not easy.’[[90]](#endnote-90) This was why consumer programs flourished. Business had a responsibility not to violate its power. Underpinning this was a belief in market democracy, in the viability of the market model beyond just commercial exchange - ‘consumers are to economics what voters are to politics’ - as one that could contain corporate power. To this end, retailers should be ‘as much buying agents for the consumer, as selling agents for the producer’ and this was Peterson’s mantra.[[91]](#endnote-91)

Again here the strains and paradoxes of Peterson’s philosophy were evident. A socially responsible retailer, accountable to shoppers as well as manufacturers, was quite at one with her vision of fair markets. But such a role for retailers like Giant was in effect a substitute for the informed consumers that Peterson craved; a substitute for consumers’ knowledge deficit that frustrated her, if one which avoided state action. Free market economists were also intrigued at this time by this question of the power of larger (Giant, one might say) businesses, although they reached different conclusions to Peterson. In 1962 the leading free-market economist Milton Friedman noted that larger businesses threatened monopoly, but also because they had power in the marketplace – unlike most participants and individuals, a point made at the turn of the century by the NCL – could use this not just for their own ends or shareholders’ interests, but ‘to further socially desirable ends.’ Friedman felt this prospect would ‘destroy a free society’. If businessman became *de facto* civil servants, they would soon be elected or state appointments, their commercial market power would be lost, and aspects like price would become public not private or market decisions.[[92]](#endnote-92)

Most often Peterson found ‘many businessmen’ gave her ‘the impression that if only I would only go away, the consumer movement would disappear’. But she and Giant knew ‘that the best way to keep the government out of the marketplace is to meet the legitimate needs of consumers’. Peterson supported the renewed impetus Nader gave to the prospect of a federal CPA in the 1970s, but remained loyal to the ideals of the market, conscious of post-war attacks on consumerism’s regulatory propensities. As with the NCL, whilst wary of regulation, but with a desire for informed consumers thwarted, Peterson resorted to legislative measures. In this Cold War context the consumer movement posed as a loyal opposition, simultaneously critical of business and pro-free market. Danzansky re-iterated how they had brought retailers, government, manufacturers, experts and consumers into ‘dialogue… in these times of polarization’ showing it was ‘possible to work within the system’. Giant’s program could then ‘serve as a model for the nation.’[[93]](#endnote-93)

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Peterson’s farewell gift from Giant was a ‘cake of equal parts of politics, business sense, street savvy’, garnished with ‘chopped Chambers of Commerce’.[[94]](#endnote-94) But were such personal and political ingredients sufficient? Under Carter the battle for a CPA was lost, despite the appointment of several Nader supporters, like Nancy Chasen as Peterson’s assistant. The defeat came through a combination of weak executive lobbying (Nader blamed Carter for leaving this to Peterson’s determined, but gentle, style – not her occasional caginess on state action); Nader’s abrasive tactics (which Peterson felt annoyed potential allies); and the unprecedented scale and militancy of the business lobby of the National Association of Manufacturers, Business Roundtable and corporate giants like General Foods. For Glickman this constituted a decisive advance for the New Right – not just in portraying consumer advocates as an interfering, out-of-touch, matriarchal, liberal elite, but in forging a populist, grassroots approach and appeal it attacked the essence of post-war liberal political culture and the idea of government regulating to improve society. This was a cultural and political as much as economic victory over the right to represent American consumers’ rights.[[95]](#endnote-95)

The sexism Peterson experienced in Johnson’s White House ensured she stood up to Giant executives and would soon stand up to US representatives at the UN. Still, Giant presented her as ‘a matriarch… honest and reassuring.’ Such gendering of consumer advocacy was not new, but revived in this period. Nader’s bachelor lifestyle was queried; even sympathisers (occasionally) presented Peterson as Lucy from the *Peanuts* comic strip – a measure of her ubiquity, but also of her perceived officiousness. What Glickman terms ‘the feminizing of the consumer movement’ saw the New Right in the 1970s target ‘the politics of the pantry’ through figures like Peterson, mothering the gullible shopper, as part of an overweening, overreaching government bureaucracy.[[96]](#endnote-96)

Peterson confessed she had realized ‘how powerful the big corporations were at… shaping the marketplace’ when she could make no headway at Giant re-arranging shelving for consumer use rather than to ensure big brands were at eye-level. Reading against the grain she saw it as a tribute to the growth in consumer awareness that ‘our opposition has organised more strongly’, but the anti-CPA lobby left Peterson ‘terrified of… the growth of corporate power on the Hill.’[[97]](#endnote-97)

Peterson was herself formidable and formidably consistent in applying her principles to her experiences – despite consistent and recurring tensions within her belief system. After the CPA’s defeat Nader turned to state – local level organising. Peterson, by contrast, turned to lobbying for the International Organisation of Consumer Unions (IOCU) at the United Nations (UN), a post she held until 1993. The logic of this was that federal regulation and private sector work was insufficient. The IOCU had been campaigning for global Consumer Protection Guidelines on child safety, the environment, and lists of US banned products (which Carter endorsed, but Reagan overturned) since 1975. Her US opponents even contemplated defining Peterson as a ‘foreign agent’ of an international NGO to impede her authority. The battlelines, as Hilton notes, between organised consumer and big business lobbies, were almost identical to those around the CPA and to attacks on the consumer movement going back to the 1930s and the New Deal. Guidelines were eventually passed in 1985, but a Code of Conduct on Transnational Corporations was re-buffed. Peterson concluded: ‘multinational corporations represent America abroad much more powerfully and visibly than striped-pants government officials and diplomats.’[[98]](#endnote-98) The mantra that consumers and business shared interests was iterated by both, but rarer in practice between their representative institutions.

What then is the balance sheet on Peterson? Was this a final defeat, or had her corporate affinity and use of the market model for wider society, suggest she had long been assimilated by conservative forces? Two recurring dilemmas she confronted were over legislation and her association with Giant. Legislation was not a last resort. It offered leverage with business. And however much it seemed to diverge from, or recalibrate, the NCL’s purported preference for consumer action in the market, regulation and protection was a simultaneously a means of enabling this. Was Peterson’s corporate embrace of Giant incompatible with NCL ideology? Not really – big business had always been part of their vision. Again it seemed a divergence or substitute for direct consumer action, but it could enable consumer choice. Above all else, the plasticity of NCL thinking in Peterson’s hands is notable. Peterson adhered to and refurbished NCL principles, but there is evidence these were flawed or undermined themselves.

Peterson’s experimentation and experience suggested change was possible, and that retail was a plural, flexible system. Peterson’s chosen successor at Giant, Odonna Matthews, noted in her obituary: ‘Her friends in consumer activism asked, ‘How can you work for a business and represent the consumer?’ She showed it could be done.’ [[99]](#endnote-99) But Peterson had recurring doubts that these efforts could reign in corporate power. A persistent beef in this regard was the relative weakness of the consumer movement or that shoppers were not up to its ideal practices, not ‘sufficiently knowledgeable’ as Peterson had put it in 1974. This was a pervasive view. The NCL, the source of much of Peterson’s outlook, aired frustrations with shoppers as well as business at the turn of the century. So did Ralph Nader, by the late 1960s the loudest voice in global consumerism and sometime ally, sometime adversary, of Peterson. Interviewed in 1969, Nader reckoned the consumer movement’s power ‘doesn’t amount to a whit’ because everyday consumers ‘don’t do much about it. They’re pretty complacent. They just sit and watch television.’[[100]](#endnote-100) Either way – shopper apathy or the consumer movement’s reservations about consumers – such an attitude explains much about what frustrated more extensive reform. Reformers were often in advance of those they sought to reform, but unlikely to close the gap once they crossed from entreating to criticising them.[[101]](#endnote-101)

On the evidence of the NCL and Peterson, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the consumer movement’s market position – common to the NCL, Peterson and other groups like Consumers’ Union and in which they alleged they were loyal to an authentic market of fair and free exchange in opposition to the power and claims of business – was flawed. Its belief in market viability made it prone to assimilation by business and its suspicions of shoppers made it reluctant to mobilize shoppers. That it resorted to acting in lieu of consumers laid it open, in Peterson’s time, to the New Right’s charge not just that it tended towards state regulation, but that far from helping consumers, it was damning of their capabilities. The market imperfections of business and shoppers that were consistently identified by the consumer movement from the NCL to Peterson suggested an imperfection in its own market position - that its strategy of helping markets work for the good of society was contradictory or destined to be a lengthy, if not Sisyphean, struggle.

Peterson (and the NCL’s Kelley before) saw in the model and preaching of consumer power a means to induce better practice in capitalism. Their opponents saw behind the language of consumer rights, knowledge and choice more orchestrated state-oriented forces opposed to, or regulating of, business. The missing ingredient, that frustrated the NCL and Peterson and in turn generated anxiety in their critics, was the informed shopper. Without informed shoppers, far from critiquing business, consumer reformers had to turn to good business practice to maintain market balance, or to state intervention. Working with markets could make them seem quite benign, materialist even – evident in the NCL’s middle class and department store support and Peterson’s employment by Giant. Even so, business was often wary that consumer activists were exploiting everyday consumers and importing an interventionist, critical agenda on their behalf, grafting a more fundamental revision of political economy onto their everyday concerns. Thus progressive consumerists could be seen as anti-capitalist or as consumerist. The point was that progressives wanted to work with and reform markets – unconvinced of the state as a remedy - as avowed free marketeers did, if for different ends.

Acknowledging that the confines of the evidence and argument here have been to illustrate the NCL’s influence on Peterson and Peterson’s influence on the consumer movement, nonetheless some more generic conclusions can be tentatively drawn from Peterson’s influences, experiences and trajectory about the history of modern market society. The evidence here nudges historians away from the idea that the political New Right alone embedded neo-liberal market nostrums in everyday life. The political roots of consumer choice came from across the political spectrum – from radical progressives to mid-century liberal reformers.[[102]](#endnote-102) All of which doubtless eased the path for later 20th century neo-liberalism. Equally, popular demand for such market principles was less evident than its advocacy by (very) different parts of the political class.

1. \* Acknowledgements

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