

Andres changes his tune

Just how many Harvie Andres are there?

There's Harvie Andres, the consumer's friend. Then, there's Harvie Andre, the defender of federal competition policy. Oh yes, and Harvie Andre, the fan of corporate mergers.

There is a Harvie Andre who is federal minister of consumer and corporate affairs. Could all these Andres be one and the same?

In case you're wondering what has brought on this attack of bewilderment, I suggest you examine Andre's recent comments on mergers. He seems to have as many shades of opinion as chameleons have skin colors.

Now, it may be the God-given right of politicians to, let's say, "adjust" their message according to the audience they are address-

ing. But, golly, Andre's diverse remarks on mergers were merely made to reporters who, of course, have no opinion.

Let's see what our minister said this week.

"Certainly, I think it might be useful for a parliamentary committee to look at corporate concentration," he told a television interviewer Monday. "I think we all have a sense of unease about these mergers... I would encourage Parliament to have a look at it."

That same day, however, he told the Toronto Star he wouldn't bypass the federal Competition Bureau and call for a public inquiry.

On Tuesday, he was arguing that mergers can be good for us and we needn't worry about corporate concentration.

HAILS MERGERS

"Mergers to enhance company strength through increased efficiency, consolidation, rationalization and so on - hallelujah," Andre told the national wire service, The

Canadian Press. "We've got to do that as a country."

He went on to say all Canadians will benefit if a merger increases industry efficiency and prices to the consumer are dropped.

Andre's words apparently caused a stir in his own precincts. There was consternation in his department. At least one reporter was called.

There was no problem with the quotes, the journalist was told, but Andre didn't like the "tone" of the article. The conversation concluded with a ministerial aide saying that perhaps Andre should choose his words more carefully.

Perhaps the problem is the nature of Andre's department. It's one of those schizophrenic entities: sometimes encountered in the bureaucracy - responsible not only for protection of consumers, but also for regulation of business. At one time, the No. 1 aim of the department was to defend consumer rights.

Times change, however, and

with a government that leans toward business, departmental goals may clash.

This may be one of those clashes.

NO SIGN

Take Andre's comment that all will benefit if industries increase efficiency and savings can be passed along to consumers. The trouble is, there's no sign both these fine goals will be achieved.

In the case of the PWA Corp. takeover of Wardair, everyone and his dog is saying air fares will rise. But PWA President Rhys Eytton says his company's future Wardair division will continue spirited competition.

Oh, sure. His real message is in a second phrase. "We don't want to see foolish competition." So what's foolish? How about two separate companies with the same owner bidding down air fares for the benefit of consumers?

Then there's the Imperial

takeover of Texaco Canada. The Consumers Association of Canada says that one will mean higher prices for motorists and homeowners who use oil.

The oil industry may be more efficient, but where are the benefits for consumers?

Then there's the Molson-Carling O'Keefe beer merger. No one is expecting lower beer prices for the consumer from that deal. About the only way that's likely to happen is if foreign competitors are allowed freely into Canada without the penalty of additional taxation.

Meanwhile, our consumer defender in cabinet is taking a firm stand on the fence. Or perhaps he doesn't really exist. Wasn't there a movie once about an invisible rabbit named Harvey?

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