

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Give car owners the right to choose

With all the talk of a restructuring plan for the automotive industry, I would like to contribute positively to that dialogue. Little notice has been given to a massive looming economic and consumer issue.

There is a piece of legislation making the rounds in Ottawa, Bill C-273, the Right to Repair Bill, which is in its second reading and will be voted on May 13. Bill C-273 protects Canadians' right to choose where they repair their vehicles while also preserving thousands of jobs.

It is rare that a private members' bill is so strongly embraced, but this issue crosses all party lines. The automotive aftermarket employs 45 per cent of the entire automotive industry, for a total of more than 410,000 workers across Canada. These workers and business owners are looking to Parliament to see if their segment of the industry has a future.

The Right to Repair Bill will not only protect jobs. Just as importantly, it will ensure that consumers have the right to choose where they get their vehicles serviced. The legislation will be debated in Parliament on May 11 and voted on May 13. I'm strongly encouraging Canadians to contact their Members of Parliament to request all-party support for consumer choice and jobs preservation.

What is the Consumer's Right to Repair bill?

Today's vehicles are highly sophisticated machines with virtually every system controlled by computers. Car companies can currently withhold information, diagnostic tools and software from independent repair facilities and retail repair chains making it impossible in many circumstances for these shops to complete repairs without sending the vehicle back to the dealer. Should this trend continue, car owners will face limitations on access to service and may experience increases in repair costs. Bill C-273 seeks to amend the Canadian Environmental Protection Act and the Competition Act in order to access to OE (original equipment) vehicle service information, tools and training.

Dealers argue that they make investments in training and equipment that should give them exclusive rights to information distribution.

The aftermarket rebuttal to that argument is that car companies produce this information to fix something on a vehicle that is not working, so it is not research and development for a new product, it's research and development to fix a product that the consumer already owns. Therefore the consumer has the right to access the software, tools and training to support their own investment when they seek out repairs, regardless of where they go for those repairs.

Moreover, the aftermarket industry invests in equipment and training as well. So the question is why should new car dealers have the exclusive right to fix something that the consumer has already paid for?

Next, the dealers argue that the aftermarket is just trying to grab additional market share. The rebuttal to that argument is there is at least \$2 billion in underperformed maintenance in the Canadian marketplace and the new car dealer network cannot service the existing fleet as it is. Vehicle dealer networks do not currently have the capacity to service the 19 million-plus vehicles on the road today. If the right to repairs not preserved, consumers will also face cost increases and longer wait times for service.

It is also important to note that there is more than enough business for both sides of this debate to flourish once the bill becomes law. The automotive aftermarket is merely asking for a level playing field to ensure it is not at a competitive disadvantage.

Why is this a consumer issue?

Vehicle manufacturers are restricting access to the tools, training and diagnostic and repair software to independent installers and retail chains. This prevents them from repairing late-model vehicles, effectively eliminating consumer choice as the car owner has no choice but to go to a dealer to service the car.

The withholding of information puts the consumer at risk of being forced to pay higher prices. It also puts the consumer at risk of considerable inconvenience. As the number of new car dealerships in Canada continues to decline, consumers can expect increased drive times and longer wait times for appointments at those dealerships. This is particularly true in smaller markets where service from an OEM dealer may require several hours of travel.

The aftermarket repair industry offers an effective, competitive environment, without which vehicle owners would become "captive customers" forced to rely on vehicle manufacturers as their exclusive supply source for parts and repair services.

Effective access to technical information is one of the key measures for improving the competitiveness of the automotive aftermarket. A sound regulatory framework for the entire automotive industry must also take into account the companies operating in the market of vehicle replacement parts, servicing and repair.

The aftermarket is simply asking for the opportunity to keep running their businesses in communities across the country. Business should thrive or fail based on quality of service and consumer demand. The highly trained technicians that work in the aftermarket should be given access to the tools of their trade.

Canadians need to research the issue and make themselves heard in the debate for the Right to Repair by writing to their MPs before May 11 about this critical issue affecting jobs, fairness and the right for Canadian drivers and motor vehicle owners to choose.

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