

Automakers ready for scrap over consumer choice in car servicing

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A battle is brewing in the automotive sector over a private member's bill designed to protect hundreds of thousands of jobs in the automotive aftermarket and guarantee consumers the right to choose where to have their vehicles serviced.

Hatch said, adding: "We've had no complaints from consumers."

Supported by the Automotive Industries Association of Canada -- and opposed by automakers and their dealers -- the bill sponsored by Brian Masse, a New Democrat MP from Windsor, is in its second reading and is expected to be debated in the House of Commons on May 11.

With today's vehicles becoming more sophisticated and automakers and dealers becoming more protective of their diagnostic tools, repair manuals and software, consumers are often left with no choice but to return to their dealers for service.

Masse's bill seeks to amend the Canadian Environmental Protection Act and the Competition Act to guarantee independent automotive service shops access to vehicle service information, tools and training.

"If this information is not made available, the negative impact on the aftermarket segment of the automotive industry in terms of the economy and jobs will be significant," said Masse. "Given the current climate, collaboration from all parties on this bill is simply responsible governance."

Masse said a similar system is in place in the U.S. which gives consumers a choice and "you shouldn't have one system in place in the U.S. and another in Canada. It can't be justified."

Compounding the problem for consumers is the fact that a declaration of bankruptcy from either General Motors or Chrysler could have a massive impact on their dealer networks.

Those who oppose the bill say lack of training, technology, experience and infrastructure in the aftermarket sector, and the possibility of stolen technology, make the bill impractical.

Automakers also say they should be able to determine how and to whom they distribute their parts, and that consumers have a closer relationship to their dealers than to other auto-service providers.

Michael Hatch, a senior economist for the Canadian Automobile Dealers Association, said his group is actively lobbying against the bill. "We believe automakers and dealers should be able to decide voluntarily what information to make available,"