

## Costello aims to make protesters pay for boycotts



Not fur game ... the proposed changes would make it harder to campaign against companies on ethical issues, such as Gucci's display of real fur in Milan this week.

Photo: *AFP*

Jessica Irvine  
February 23, 2007

THIS Gucci model is draped in real fur - but if you find that offensive, you might soon think twice about organising a boycott of the company. Under a proposal from Peter Costello, you could be the one bearing the financial loss.

The federal Treasurer yesterday announced changes that would leave groups that organise boycotts against companies for moral or ethical reasons at greater risk of prosecution. The changes, described as "McCarthyist" by the Greens, will give the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission powers to initiate legal action and seek compensation on behalf of companies targeted by boycotts.

Mr Costello said the changes were aimed at protecting farmers against groups such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which has called for a global boycott of Australian wool over sheep mulesing. It is targeting designers in Milan during its fashion shows this week.

The Greens leader, Bob Brown, said the move was "a cynical exercise that seeks to turn a well-respected watchdog into a political attack dog".

Taxpayers could end up footing the legal bill for companies acting in an ethically questionable manner, Senator Brown said, and efforts by indigenous groups to protect their land from mining companies could also be stymied.

A spokeswoman for the commission would not say whether it had been consulted about the changes. "It's a matter for policy and a matter for the Government," she said.

Under existing competition law, the consumer commission can launch action and impose penalties on organisations that seek to hinder or prevent the supply of goods to or from a company. Unions have been fined as much as \$150,000 for physically blocking goods or services.

Mr Costello said the changes simply extended those powers.

"At the moment any individual could take an action to stop the boycott," he said. "But you see an individual farmer

might not be that effective, and an individual farmer may not have the financial ability to bring the action."

He denied the changes could be used to limit free speech.

"You can say what you like. You can be as ignorant as you like. There's no law that's going to stop ignorant commentary, but there will be a law which allows the ACCC to stand up for Australian farmers when they suffer from a boycott."

The Opposition assistant treasury spokesman, Chris Bowen, said Labor would need to see more than a one-page press release before taking a stance on such an important issue. "There is a balance to be reached here between the genuine concerns of community groups and the needs of business," he said.

A spokesman for the consumer advocacy group Choice, Gordon Renouf, said consumers had a right not to buy products on ethical grounds.

"There is a fine line between letting people get on with their business and interfering with consumer choice."

---

**When news happens:** send photos, videos & tip-offs to 0424 SMS SMH (+61 424 767 764), or [email us](#).

---

[SAVE 33% on home delivery of the Herald - subscribe today](#)

Copyright © 2007. The Sydney Morning Herald.