

2013

Esther Peterson Lecture



American Council on
Consumer Interests

Researching Consumer Economic and Financial Issues



Esther Peterson

*“Do What is Right,
Let the Consequences Follow.”*

-Esther Peterson
Restless (1995)
Caring Publishing, Washington, DC

Esther Was...

- A Labor Educator
- A Union Organizer
- A Labor Lobbyist
- A Consumer Advocate
- Recognized as an eloquent and effective advocate for the rights of workers, women, the elderly, and citizens of Third World countries.

*....the “Grande Dame
of the Consumer Movement.”*

Esther's Start...

- She was inspired by the new labor movement emerging in the 1930s
- She worked for
 - International Ladies Garment Workers Union,
 - American Federation of Teachers and
 - Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.
- Esther taught "working girls" through the industrial department of the YWCA

1930s

- Peterson became an organizer for the American Federation of Teachers.
 - With the first of her four children born in 1938 , she experienced first-hand the difficulties of balancing the demands of work and family.
 - Discovered that the cost of daily child care often exceeded the wages paid to women in the jobs typically available to them, such as being a teacher.
- Later she became an educator for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union.
 - Taught garment workers about their rights under union contracts.
 - “What will the union do for me?” was the question most asked of her.

1940s

- Peterson moved to Washington and became the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union's first female lobbyist.
- She fought for legislation to strengthen the Fair Labor Standards Act
 - Established the federal minimum wage
 - Regulated overtime pay and child labor.

- *“When I first reported for my job, I walked into a meeting at the old CIO headquarters at Jefferson Square... The men sat around a table; when I entered the room they stood up. I knew I didn’t want to be treated differently. I said, ‘Please don’t stand up for me. I don’t intend to stand up for you.’”*

1950s

- Peterson served as the AFL-CIO's first woman lobbyist when she joined the legislative staff of the Industrial Union Department.
- She was a member of the National Committee on Equal Pay, led by labor women and men from the IUE, UAW and other unions whose objective was to end wage discrimination against women.

Presidential Appointments

- President John F. Kennedy appointed her as director of the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor (1961).
 - The highest-ranking woman in the Kennedy administration
 - Later named as Assistant Secretary for Labor Standards (1963 - 1968) and worked to enforce wage, work-hour, and health and safety protections.



Presidential Appointments

- Peterson served as President Lyndon Johnson's special assistant on consumer affairs (1964–1967).
 - Worked for legislation enacted on:
 - Truth-in-Lending, Truth-in-Advertising, and Truth-in-Packaging
 - Meat and Poultry Inspection
 - Occupational Safety
- She was reappointed as Special Assistant for Consumer Affairs to President Jimmy Carter (1977 – 1980).
 - A chief goal of Peterson was the establishment of a federal agency on consumer protection.
 - Defeated by Congress due to widespread business opposition and refusal to compromise by consumer advocates.
- President Bill Clinton named Peterson to the U.S. delegation to the United Nations in 1993.

An Advocate for Women

- Peterson helped to establish the first Presidential Commission on the Status of Women.
 - Documented discrimination against women.
 - The commission's 1963 report sparked a national debate over the proper role of women and helped spur the rise of a new women's movement.
- She led the successful campaign to pass the Equal Pay Act of 1963
 - This act required workers to receive equal pay for work requiring equal skill, effort and responsibility, and performed under similar working conditions regardless of gender.



An Advocate for Consumers

- Her consumer advocacy resulted in new federal laws -
 - Labeling of foods with their nutritional value
 - Pricing of food products per unit
 - Use of open dating – labeling with a date by which perishable products such as milk must be sold
- Peterson served as vice president for consumer affairs at Giant Food Inc. (1970–1977).
 - Persuaded the corporation to adopt unit pricing and open dating policies
 - Led to the acceptance of similar practices by other large food chains



An Advocate for Third World Countries

- Peterson played a key role as a representative for the International Organization of Consumers Unions (IOCU) (now Consumers International) at the United Nations.
- She lobbied for
 - The adoption of the UN Consumer Protection Guidelines in 1985.
 - The guidelines are used as a model to persuade Third World countries to establish consumer protections.
 - Adoption of *United Nations Consolidated List of Products Whose Manufacture and/or Sale Has Been Banned, Withdrawn, Severely Restricted or Not Approved by Governments*



“I think consumer issues have a significant impact on international relations. After all, when workers are exploited, national resources are squandered, and human rights come in second to corporate greed, we cannot be surprised to find hostility between countries. International respect and economic cooperation are the foundations of peace.”

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A Lifelong Advocate

- She organized consumer groups and insurance agents into the Consumer Insurance Interest Group
 - a coalition to persuade state governments to strengthen regulation of the insurance industry.
- Peterson helped to organize the United Seniors Health Cooperative
- Peterson served as a board member for numerous consumer organizations and companies, with her public service career continuing well past retirement age.

1980

Esther Peterson was awarded the Medal of Freedom
by President Jimmy Carter





“She had a velvet hammer and talked people into doing what was right, even if we didn't know it at the time.”

- Lynda Johnson Robb
Daughter of President Lyndon B. Johnson

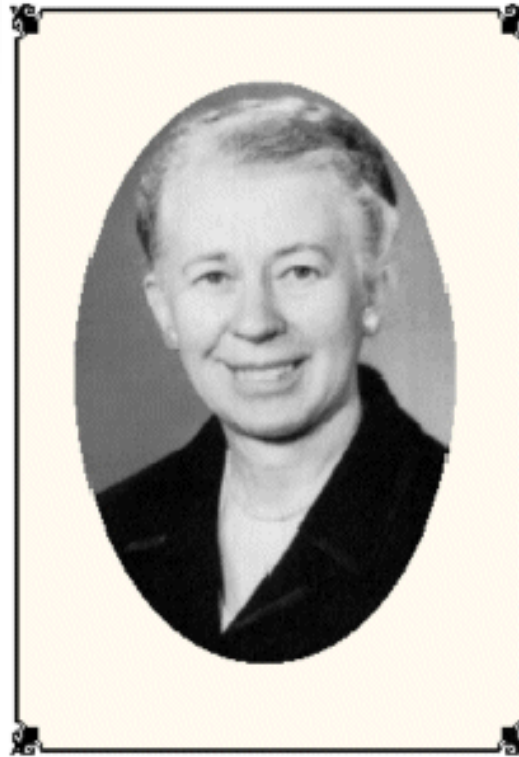


“I’m not one who feels that you have to be brave and be a star, but your life can be satisfying and happy if you work to make a difference. Maybe the difference will be just a little tiny piece and not a big difference. But the point is to make a difference by the way you live your life.”

-Esther Peterson
Restless (1995)
Caring Publishing, Washington, DC

For More Information on Esther Peterson

- AFL-CIO (www.aflcio.org).
- Brobeck, S. (Ed.) (1997). *Encyclopedia of the consumer movement*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO
- Peterson, E. & Conkling, W. (1995). *Restless: The memoirs of labor and consumer activist Esther Peterson*. Washington D.C.: Caring Publications.



The Esther Peterson Lectureship
was established in 1990 to recognize and honor
the outstanding, long-term contributions
of Esther Peterson (1906-1997)
to consumer policy making.

Lecturers are chosen by ACCI's Board of Directors
to inform its members of issues and opportunities
affecting consumer policy.

The 2013 Esther Peterson Lecture



*Testing, Informing, Protecting: A Short Personal History of Consumers Union and
Consumers International*

Sharon L. Nelson

*Chief, Consumer Protection Division,
Washington State Attorney General's Office
Chair of the Board of Directors of Consumers Union*

Previous Esther Peterson Lecturers

2012

David I. Laibson

Professor of Economics, Harvard University

2011

Damon Silvers

Director of Policy and Special Counsel, AFL-CIO

2010

Mercer Bullard

Harold Evensky

Ira Hammerman

2009

Robert H. Frank

H.J. Louis Professor of Management and Professor of Economics, Johnson Graduate School of Management Cornell University

2008

James Hamilton

Professor of Economics, University of California, San Diego

2007

Mila Kofman

Associate Research Professor, Health Policy Institute, Georgetown University

2006

Caroline Warne

Chair, Consumer Policy Committee, International Organization for Standardization

2005

Connie Weaver

Distinguished Professor & Department Head, Foods & Nutrition Department, Purdue University

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