

Government Orders

Our amendment would have strengthened the bill in efficiency as well as cost effectiveness. We all know that the auditor general makes reports on how the government is undertaking certain environmental initiatives. Most recently in his 1994 report the auditor general reported on the environmental partners fund and the ice services branch of the Atmospheric Environmental Service. In the 1995 report Mr. Desautels reported on environmental management systems and environmental hazardous wastes. Allow me to briefly go through the report on hazardous wastes from the May 1995 report. The auditor general cites background information, audit objectives, observations and recommendations on the storage and destruction of PCBs.

It is no secret to Canadians that as a country we have a tremendous problem with PCB waste. We have been stockpiling the contaminated wastes for years. Now we are trying to get rid of it at the lowest possible cost. I read recently that Canadian companies hold a total of 127,025 tonnes of PCBs at 3,216 storage sites across the country. This number includes 495 federal sites containing 5,206 tonnes.

This is outrageous. What is even more scandalous is the fact that the government continues to do little about it. The minister may talk of studies, but studies will not help the people of Sydney, Nova Scotia, home of one of Canada's most polluted industrial wastelands. The Sydney tar ponds are presently contaminated by over 700,000 tonnes of toxic chemicals, including PCBs, coal tar, volatile aromatics, acid drainage and raw sewage. The minister says progress is being made, yet to date less than 90 tonnes of waste have been incinerated, not even 1 per cent.

We are not talking about storage sites holding newspapers or pop cans waiting to be recycled. These are sites holding a substance banned in Canada in the late 1970s; dangerous toxic sites, harmful to health.

In many communities laden with a PCB problem, a steady rise in the cancer rate is not uncommon. Sydney is now known as Canada's cancer capital, with a rate almost three times the national average.

● (1540)

The auditor general's report on managing hazardous waste outlines the role Environment Canada should play in the management of PCBs. It states the following:

The Department provides the federal voice at CCME and federal leadership in the development and implementation of federal-provincial initiatives to regulate the use of PCBs and the storage and destruction of PCB wastes. The Department also spearheads the federal part of the national initiative by co-ordinating the activities of federal owners of PCBs and providing advice to both headquarters and regional levels on the storage, transportation and treatment of PCB waste.

In May 1994 the auditor general put forward his report on the management of hazardous waste. Now, one year and six months later, what has the federal government done to improve the PCB problem? Nothing. What will the government do? I am open to hear all the answers; however, I believe it will perhaps maintain the status quo. Again, the status quo really is nothing. I doubt that a commissioner will make much difference.

The auditor general clearly spelled out for the government that PCB sites need to be cleaned up. How much more can I stress the point the auditor general made? He did not say it would be simply a good idea to clean up the sites. Rather, he stated it was essential in order that the health of Canadians would not be put in jeopardy.

The government did not respond to the report. Therefore, if the government is clearly not acting on the auditor general's reports, I want to know what will be so special about the reports that will be written by the commissioner that will make the government act. Perhaps when we have time for questions and comments some hon. members from the government benches will be able to enlighten me on how they would be more apt to follow the warnings of the commissioner when they do not now follow those of the auditor general.

Bill C-83 will give us an environmental commissioner, whom we are told will whip the government into shape with respect to environmental issues. That is something the auditor general has apparently been trying to do.

The bill outlines that the commissioner will have several tasks to undertake. One of those tasks is the handling of petitions. A resident of Canada will now be able to file a petition concerning an environmental matter in the context of sustainable development. The commissioner would then forward it to the appropriate minister for whom the petition was intended. The recipient minister would then be required to acknowledge receipt of the petition within 15 days. In addition, that same minister would be required to respond to the petition within four months. In the bill it notes that the four-month period might be extended by the minister if the petitioner and the auditor general were both notified that it would not be possible to respond within the allotted four months.

The bill is really saying we need legislated permission for someone to write a complaint letter. Maybe with this new wrinkle the minister might even answer the mail.

Another duty of the new commissioner will be to monitor whether federal departments have met the objectives set out in their sustainable development strategies. The bill's amendment to section 24 would require that each federal department prepare a sustainable development strategy and table it in the House of Commons. Departments will have to table their strategies within