

its environmental assessment process on a strong, clear legislative footing.

• (1650)

In 1987, three years ago, the government asked the then Minister of the Environment to consult the public on the need for and manner of reforming the environmental assessment and review process. The minister issued a green paper to serve as a basis for that consultation. Six months of public meetings were held in major centres across Canada, followed by a national consultative workshop in March 1988.

Broad consultations were held with a wide spectrum of Canadians, including governments, the private sector, native peoples, environmental special interest groups, legal profession, and environmental assessment professionals. I think a very comprehensive approach was taken to ensure that there would be a clear, strong, legislative foundation. Participants in the consultations called for an accountable and administratively simple process based in law that is effective, efficient, fair, and open. I trust that all members in this House would agree with that.

The government has responded clearly and strongly to the needs of the country and of the Canadian people. The key elements of these reforms is in fact a proposed Canadian environmental assessment act, for the first time a comprehensive legislative commitment to good decision-making.

While the focus of our debate will be on the legislation, and I understand that will be continued tomorrow, I wish to point out to members that the government is going even further, not just providing that legislation to ensure this package fills the needs of Canadians today.

We are not stopping simply with the introduction of C-78. Beginning immediately the government is requiring that environmental factors be integrated into all government policy decisions. That I would say, Mr. Speaker, is an unprecedented step. I cannot overstate its importance to government decision-making.

Certainly this is a matter that my colleagues on the environment committee have considered very carefully, believing that it is a very important aspect of contemporary government responsibility and accountability. Government policies are often the determining factor regarding what economic development projects are con-

ceived and implemented across Canada. If the policies are not environmentally sensitive, it is much more difficult to ensure the resulting projects will be, even with tough assessment legislation such as we are introducing.

Henceforth, therefore, Mr. Speaker, all decisions of cabinet will require the potential environmental effects to be assessed and considered. If the members opposite want to ask questions at the end, I would be happy to try and answer them if I could.

To help build public confidence that this is being done consistently and well, the responsible minister will be required to make a clear statement about the environmental effects of the policy initiative at the time it is announced. I want to stress again that the fundamental issue here is that we are dealing with a project after the fact and with a process that was flawed from the outset. If we do not acknowledge those two things, we are really not dealing with the essence of the issue.

Also, to help ensure consistency and to enable the public to see the rules under which government is functioning in this regard, the Minister of the Environment has been asked to develop a set of clear guidelines for use by all departments and the Privy Council Office has been asked to amend cabinet procedural manuals accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, I had the advantage briefly many years ago of sitting at that cabinet table and knowing of the kind of criteria that apply. It was certainly not the practice then and I am sure it was not the practice of the government that succeeded it, but now we are being advised that in fact these cabinet documents must require, must have, that kind of environmental assessment.

Further opportunity for public scrutiny can be reinforced by the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Environment which I have the honour to chair, and which can then request any minister to appear before it to explain the environmental implications of any new policy or program. The government will certainly encourage and welcome this form of public accountability.

I think we must remember that it is not just enough to have guidelines. It is not even just enough to make sure they are clear, that they are public.