

Sunset Laws

the work it is doing, and to ascertain whether it was meeting the principles and concepts for which it had been established, perhaps today refineries in eastern Canada might have the ability to say to the people of Atlantic Canada, "You will get your fuel oil, your home heating fuels and your gasoline for next winter." As it stands now, we do not know that. I do not know the reason for this either.

I do not want to be accused of talking out my own bill, but I do want very briefly to mention one other potentially very positive aspect of sunset legislation, and that is the ability of the legislation to involve ordinary people directly in the review process. Perhaps this could provide some real meaning to that almost forgotten slogan "participatory democracy". In any event it would seem natural that the designated committee would want to hear from those individuals and organizations directly affected by a particular program or agency. By appearing before a committee these groups could offer an insight into the effectiveness of certain government activities which we seldom receive.

● (1620)

The secrecy surrounding government activities in recent years is appalling on its own, and I do not think that I need to take up the time of the House with a dissertation on some of the sad examples of the consequences of secrecy. I say that we should put these programs and agencies up for review in a public forum responsible to this chamber, and made up of members from all sides of the House. The government should expose itself to the people of the country, particularly those who are directly affected; then they would have some assistance in the formulation of future program policies.

In summing up, I hope that hon. members will feel that the subject matter of this bill deserves further study. I firmly believe that the sunset approach offers a practical means of ensuring that public funds are economically and efficiently spent. It is my objective as a Progressive Conservative member of parliament, and it has been for the 14 years I have been a member of this House, to look for new ways in an attempt to balance our budget. It does not necessarily have to be sunset law, but I ask hon. members to take a look at the proposed bill and what is implied in it, to look at their daily work and the mail which comes across their desks, at the time and energy spent in responding to that mail, and to think for a moment of the time, energy and dollars consumed in the ministers' offices to secure answers for constituents, and then make a judgment about some approach to the proliferation of agencies, programs and departments and, indeed, even ministries which we are faced with today, so that we do not take quite ten years before we get around to doing something useful about it.

I want economy and efficiency, and one of the ways to get it within the agencies and programs of this government is through the responsibility and accountability of them to the public. It is also a means of involving Canadians directly in those areas of government which affect them most, and this, in my view, is very important.

[Mr. Forrestall.]

I have one final comment. Some eight or ten years ago I proposed, not a new concept to the western world, to this chamber, and I have done so in every parliamentary session since 1969-1970—the concept of an independent accident investigation commission. The other day the Minister of Transport (Mr. Lang) finally allowed, perhaps because of the heat he was under with respect to standards of safety in transport in this country, the introduction of a bill which emulates the one that I had put before this chamber so many times in recent years. I do not mind waiting seven years, eight years or nine years—now it will probably be ten years—for a good concept to find its way into legislation, but I hope, for the sake of the Canadian economy, and to cope with a growing, sometimes almost unmanageable labyrinth of agencies and programs, that it will not take this long for members of this chamber to recognize that there is some validity in this concept.

Mr. Albert Béchard (Bonaventure-Îles-de-la-Madeleine): Mr. Speaker, in speaking on this bill I have decided to take a pragmatic approach. I do not think that it will work. It will not work as it is now presented, for a variety of reasons. For instance, the workload it would impose on parliamentarians would be overwhelming, and diverse opinions from diverse public groups would cloud the issues which would be fundamental to any review process. Sheer work volume would make reviews superficial and ineffective, and forward looking futuristic type programs vital in a changing society would get short shrift in favour of what was appealing on a short-term basis.

There are, in my opinion, many other reasons equally compelling that militate against the proposal advanced in this legislation.

Mr. Forrestall: It is a good idea.

Mr. Béchard: Beyond the negative aspects, there is the other very practical question as to whether it is necessary. I suggest to hon. members that it is not. The government has mechanisms—they have been mentioned by others—and it has the authority, by virtue of its majority, to review any program or any project that it deems has outlived its usefulness. So where does this leave the proposed legislation? It leaves it in the position of being unworkable and undesirable.

I would like, Mr. Speaker, to add substance to these rather bald statements to show why this legislation is impractical for this nation at this time, even though the intent is laudable. Sunset legislation provides a predetermined termination date. In other words, before any project is ever launched, someone has planned its demise unless, of course, it can be demonstrated somewhere down the line that it should be kept alive. In isolation, that seems to me to be a fairly inflexible and somewhat illogical approach. In fairness, though, this proposal is not so much to eliminate programs but to evaluate them, and the termination date is simply a mechanism to force that into happening.

There are other problems with this legislation. This enforced evaluation system on a predetermined schedule is first cousin