

I listened with care last night to the words of my hon. friend from Skeena, and I must say that it was a lesson for all of us as to how one can synthesize a career full of knowledge on related subjects and somehow annex them to another project before us. I was somewhat amazed and somewhat impressed.

I listened with care to the comments of my hon. friend from Labrador who has shown, as always, careful application of his intellect and his wit to any given subject. I congratulate him on his speech.

The north is known for its resources and no resource is more important than water. In 1970 Parliament acknowledged the value of the water resource by passing the Northern Inland Waters Act. This legislation authorizes the Crown to regulate the planning and use of water resources in Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Parliament at that time created the Northwest Territories and Yukon Water Boards which issue water use licences with the approval of the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

Two decades have passed since the Northern Inland Waters Act came into force. Circumstances have changed but the legislation has not. The original act met the needs of the time, but a number of weaknesses and inconsistencies have been identified in recent years. It is therefore incumbent upon the House and a commitment of the government to bring the legislation into the 1990s.

Toward that end the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development introduced two separate bills that will replace and update the Northern Inland Waters Act. Bill C-52, the Yukon Waters Act, repeals the existing legislation and replaces it with a system of water resources management that reflects the realities and needs of today. Bill C-51, the Northwest Territories Waters Act, establishes the same arrangements in the Northwest Territories.

There are a number of practical reasons for splitting the current legislation into two separate bills. First, this step acknowledges that the Northwest Territories and Yukon are two separate and distinct territories. It recognizes that each territory has its own particular water issues and geographic characteristics as well as different needs, priorities and economies.

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Splitting the act will allow water management systems to evolve differently in each territory. In the longer term it will also facilitate the eventual devolution of responsibility for water management to the territorial governments, should this be desired.

Having said that, I want to make it clear that the two bills before the House today are based on the existing Northern Inland Waters Act and in fact maintain many of the same provisions. They both contain essentially the same amendments, and I will be addressing them as a single entity. The only significant difference between the two bills is that the Yukon Act repeals the existing legislation. This step is necessary in order for the new legislation to be enacted.

A number of problems have been identified regarding the Northern Inland Waters Act. Concerns about the legal certainty of the licensing process, the accountability of the minister and the rights of domestic and traditional users have been expressed by many stakeholders.

Our objective with the new acts is to correct these inadequacies. We are not establishing a completely new system for water management north of 60, rather we are building on existing structures and processes in order to strengthen and clarify the system. The amendments we are proposing will help streamline water use licensing, which in turn will contribute to economic development and job creation in the north. The amendments will also respect the overriding need to protect the environment, human life and health.

It is important to recognize that these proposals are generally supported by all interested groups in the north, including environmentalists, aboriginal people, the territorial governments and industry. In fact, the legislation before us today is the product of lengthy and exhaustive consultations with the many groups concerned with northern water management.

In particular, I would like to draw members' attention to the role played by the Yukon Mining Advisory Committee to which my friend from Labrador has already referred. The Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development established this committee in October 1990 to review the proposed changes to the Northern Inland Waters Act as well as changes to the lands legislation affecting mining. The detailed examination it performed is a fine example of the government's