

Government Orders

I support Bill C-71. My colleagues support Bill C-71. It will not set the world on its head but it is a step in the right direction and is worthy of our support. It is certainly a shame that the government is not moving ahead with a Canadian agenda but instead is keeping to housekeeping legislation like this which we could have moved through even more rapidly than it is going through the House.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the legislation and look forward to its speedy passage.

Ms. Roseanne Skoke (Central Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Explosives Act is an act of public and worker safety which regulates the composition, quality and character of explosives in addition to their manufacture, importation, sale, purchase, possession and storage. It also controls the use of fireworks.

The amendment is necessary to require the incorporation of a detectable additive in plastic explosives coupled with a provision to enable the governor in council to make regulations to control unmarked plastic explosives. This will hinder terrorism and will enable Canada to ratify the ICAO convention on the marking of plastic explosives for the purpose of detection.

The principal provisions of the bill are worth noting: to require the marking of most plastic explosives for the purpose of detection; to prohibit the manufacture, storage, possession, transfer of possession, transportation, import and export of unmarked plastic explosives, except as may be permitted by the terms of the convention or required by overriding military necessity; and to empower the governor in council to make regulations governing the possession, transfer and disposal of any unmarked plastic explosives.

The passage of the legislation will vault Canada ahead of the U.S. as the only producer state in the Americas to have ratified the convention.

Many questions have been asked with respect to the Explosives Act. Some of those questions are technical; others relate to policy and still others are legal questions. I intend to address those questions today.

One technical question asked is will the addition of a detection agent be effective in combating terrorism in disguise? The answer is yes. The proposed detection agents are of such character they can be detected by bomb detection equipment of current technology and use in Canada. This would render marked plastic explosives an undesirable choice for assembling bombs. A second benefit from tagging plastic explosives is that detection of illegal stockpiles will be simplified.

Another technical question often asked is will the presence of the detection agent compromise the performance or safety of plastic explosives? The answer is no. Only one type of plastic explosive, a military version known as C-4, is manufactured in small quantities in Canada. The safety and performance characteristics of the marked version have been verified by the manufacturer, the military and the Canadian Explosives Research Laboratory.

Another technical question asked is will there be a problem in using the existing stocks of unmarked plastic explosives? The answer is no. Small existing stocks of unmarked plastic explosives in Canada coupled with ample grace periods of three years for the public and fifteen years for the military police to use up or destroy these stocks were judged to be satisfactory during consultations with all concerned parties.

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Another technical question often asked is whether explosives technology is advancing so rapidly that this initiative will soon be rendered obsolete. The answer is no. Explosives technology is stable at this time. In North America, plastic explosives are implicated in very few bombs targeted at aircraft. Prohibitions against the import, export and transfer of unmarked plastic explosives will discourage terrorists from using Canada as a location to plant bombs on aircraft.

Many policy questions have been raised as well. One question often asked is who may manufacture, possess and use plastic explosives in Canada and how will the legislation affect their activities. Plastic explosives in the form of military demolition charges are manufactured in small quantities on an as required basis by Les produits chimiques Expro in Valleyfield, Quebec. This manufacturer is authorized by its factory licence, which is issued pursuant to the Explosives Act and regulations. Sale and distribution of this product is limited to the military, as well as police explosives disposal units.

Commercial plastic explosives in sheet form are legally imported from the U.S. by companies engaged in hardening metal surfaces and explosives welding. The sole Canadian manufacturer does not expect any problems. Importers of commercial plastic explosives in sheet form, however, may experience difficulties in locating suppliers of marked product.

Another policy question often asked is whether these new restrictions will affect competitiveness. The answer is no. It is estimated that the cost associated with incorporating the additive will increase selling prices by no more than 1.25 per cent. It is quite possible that the Canadian manufacturer could realize a competitive advantage in international markets by being fast off the mark in offering marked products.