

Adjournment Debate

ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS—REQUEST FOR CLARIFICATION OF STATEMENTS ON EMISSION STANDARDS APPLICABLE TO SYNCRUDE

Mr. Stuart Leggatt (New Westminster): Mr. Speaker, I am sorry to see the House vacating itself so quickly. I am aware of what happened in British Columbia last week, but I am delighted to see that some of my hon. friends are remaining.

This matter arises from a question asked of the former minister of the environment on November 14 dealing with the ecological effects of the tar sands development in Alberta. The minister answered a variety of questions over several days, and as reported at page 9016 of *Hansard* she answered my question as follows:

Mr. Speaker, I want to assure the hon. member that we do not feel we have a conflict of interest. Quite to the contrary, it is precisely because we have some involvement in that project that any activity at that site falls within government policy, under which environmental impact studies must be produced to the satisfaction of the Department of the Environment.

That answer was given to protect the government from the allegation that, in view of the heavy investment made by the Government of Canada in the Alberta tar sands project, its ability to protect people of the area, in the Northwest Territories and in Saskatchewan, from the probable effect of excessive SO₂ emissions in developing the tar sands is inhibited.

My point in again raising the issue tonight is to get the government to come to grips with a serious ecological problem associated with that development, and also to challenge the abandonment by the government of any kind of ecological leadership, particularly in view of the recent decision to eliminate the Department of the Environment as a separate department, in a sense drowning it in the Department of Fisheries.

We have been concerned for some time, in this party and on this side of the House, with what appears to be an eroding attitude in respect of protection of the environment. In fact what we have been faced with is really a policy paralysis in ecological matters. When I and the hon. member for Oshawa-Whitby (Mr. Broadbent) asked the government, specifically the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources (Mr. Gillespie), to explain why the federal government had not yet had a representative on the board of directors of the tar sands project, and why no final agreement had been signed, his answer was that it had not been signed yet, but an agreement in principle had been reached on February 3 of this year.

During that ten-month period decisions which will have important environmental effects have been taken by the management committee which is running the day-to-day operations of the tar sands projects. One of these important decisions taken by management was to enter into an agreement with the Alberta government which allows the Syncrude project to emit 287 long tons of sulphur dioxide per day, in spite of the fact that experts within the Department of the Environment had said in 1974 that 140 long tons a day was an unrealistic figure, but that 40 long tons were O.K. in terms of existing technology.

If, as the minister says, the government has representation on the management committee which signed that agreement, I can only suggest that their impact on that

important decision was ludicrously feeble, or that the government has given them inadequate direction or, worse, that the government does not really care about the environment when it interferes with making money on that project, at the expense of the health of the community.

Another possible explanation is that the leadership in the Department of the Environment has been confused or feeble in its ability to get its interests across to a Cabinet that is now hot in pursuit of energy and profit from the Syncrude project. Certainly confusion characterizes the answers we have received in this House about SO₂ emissions and the role Environment Canada had and should play in guaranteeing clean air and good health to the people of Saskatchewan and Alberta, who are now living under the threat of ecological disaster.

In answer to a series of questions I put to the then minister of the environment regarding national emission standards, the minister said that such standards were provincial matters. Later she said that any activity within Syncrude fell within standards established by the Department of the Environment.

The key question is, why have there been no emission standards taken or adopted as if there had been no environmental standards declared under the Clean Air Act? After the minister left her portfolio, and we now have a vacant portfolio, a declaration was made. It appeared in today's paper and has regard to asbestos fibre standards finally coming into force under the Clean Air Act. Yet significantly nothing has been done with regard to SO₂ emissions from the tar sands project.

Why is it that the government continues to drag its feet? In this case of the tar sands it must be a matter of justice not only being done but appearing to be done, and that conflict of interest we have charged the government with is now demonstrated by inactivity in terms of enforcing ecological standards in respect of the tar sands. Again the management committee, with federal representation, has agreed to standards which the Department of the Environment rejected a long time ago. This is a clear erosion of the kind of environmental standards to which Canadian people are entitled.

There is in the long term, and I think Mr. Maurice Strong said it recently, in times of economic uncertainty or economic recession, a tendency for the environment to be the first thing to go. The government has demonstrated a lack of leadership and a feebleness toward that subject which the people in the tar sands area, and indeed the people of Canada in general, are going to remember long unless significant change takes place very quickly.

Mr. Ralph E. Goodale (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Transport): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to respond to my hon. friend this evening on behalf of the Acting Minister of the Environment (Mr. LeBlanc), and the parliamentary secretary. The former minister's statement in the House in response to questions by the hon. member for Oshawa-Whitby (Mr. Broadbent) and the hon. member for New Westminster (Mr. Leggatt), clearly indicated the approach we have taken with regard to this project.