

Government Orders

This bill to establish a federal environmental review process charts new waters. We have all acknowledged that over the last day here in the House. The bill seeks to lay out in law the role which the federal government and its agencies must play in assessing the potential environmental impact of major undertakings.

Given all the new environmental assessment or the lack thereof, given all the news generated in the form of James Bay II, the Oldman dam, Rafferty-Alameda, Kemano, Point Aconi and others, there can be no question that this is the most important single piece of environmental law ever brought before this Parliament.

As I said, the bill charts new waters and many of these waters remain murky. We already know of many of the weaknesses of the bill, weaknesses that the government refused to face during the committee work on the bill. We know that there will be other problems found down the road as we move along in the bill, as the provisions of this bill and its regulations are brought into play, tested and explored.

The future of our environment that we know we borrow from our children rests in part on the ability of the federal government to protect the environment from damage that may be caused by activities, policies and programs. The ability to review this act in depth at least every five years is one step in strengthening that protection for our environment.

This is not a new concept. All three political parties participating in the review of this bill have voiced similar concerns. As we know from the matter in front of us today, all three parties in the House have amendments in this regard.

I raised the need to review this act during committee discussions. The parliamentary secretary who is in the House today stated on one occasion: "I would remind Mr. Taylor, while this bill indeed is breaking new and important ground, legislation can of course be amended at any time".

Karen Brown, vice-president of policy and regulatory affairs of the Federal Environmental Assessment Review Office, stated before the committee: "The problem that we have right now is that we don't have enough experience to know exactly how we would work it into the bill. Until we get further experience we are really not sure what it is we would regulate and how".

The hon. member for Davenport who spoke quite well during the debate yesterday, representing the Liberal Party for much of the committee hearings, stated: "This was a technically difficult bill and, as Mr. Taylor said, we have learned a lot. We are charting new territory. We will probably discover the weaknesses and strengths of this bill as it is being practised. Probably in a few years there will be a set of amendments that will close the loopholes".

The parliamentary secretary also alluded to the future need to amend this act, and I quote him from the discussion during committee: "I guess my inclination would be to see how it operates", meaning the act. "When we reopen this after a bit of experience, perhaps Mr. Taylor's amendment would be at the right time".

All in this House and all Canadians agree that protecting the environment is central to the work the government should be doing. This bill sets out an environmental assessment process which would take a step toward strengthening the protection of the environment. As all of us who have been actively involved with this legislation know, the bill does not go far enough in protecting the environment. Because it charts new waters there will be undoubtedly important areas which will not be covered by the bill. Some important matters have already been ignored altogether. In other ways which may be unknown to us at this time, this bill will fail to address properly the needs of Canadians for strong environmental assessment and protection.

The simple motion before us today calls for the government to review this bill after five years and for every five years after that, to acknowledge that we should have a look at the very technical aspects of the bill to ensure that we are doing exactly the right thing.

The minister responsible has the authority to do this. It is a very simple task that the department should be doing in any case. The review allows for a more public presence in that review process.

In conclusion and put very simply, I state that there is every reason to support the motion I am putting before the House. There are many good reasons to support this review mechanism. I ask members of this House for their support for my motion.

Hon. Chas. L. Caccia (Davenport): Mr. Speaker, we have reached now an interesting point in our discussions. We have before us three different approaches to the same problem. One proposal is from my colleague for