

*Government Orders***NATIONAL ROUND TABLE ON THE
ENVIRONMENT AND THE ECONOMY ACT****MEASURE TO ENACT**

Hon. Gerry Weiner (for the Minister of the Environment) moved that Bill C-72, an act to establish the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, be read the second time and referred to a legislative committee in the Natural Resources envelope.

• (1550)

Mr. Nelson A. Riis (Kamloops): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure once again to have an opportunity to debate Bill C-72, an act to establish the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy.

I simply want to say we have waited some time for this opportunity and I am pleased it is happening today. I think this is an excellent initiative. As you know, Mr. Speaker, the round table has essentially been constituted and this will really give it the formal acknowledgement and recognition it so justly deserves.

I know there are others who wish to share their comments on this so I will keep my comments extremely brief.

We have some concerns in terms of this particular bill. It may give the impression that the government is very serious in terms of dealing with some significant environmental issues confronting the country. I think it may be that, but we hope it is much more. We hope it can set the stage for a much greater set of initiatives in the future. When we look around Canada today and consider the commitment, or lack of commitment to environmental assessments on some of the critical major resource projects in the country, we wonder just how serious the government is.

At this point I want to say we support Bill C-72 with some enthusiasm. I look forward to the discussions that will occur later once this gets to committee.

Mrs. Marlene Catterall (Ottawa West): Mr. Speaker, I am afraid I will not be quite so brief. We have a number of things to say concerning the bill. However we reiterate our general support for the bill and in particular our support for the work of the round table.

At the same time we must express some concerns, which we will be raising in committee, about the independence of the round table now that it is to be established in legislation. We have seen a number of situations where other independent bodies that were set up to provide independent advice to Canadians, government and Parliament were jeopardized in their independence. In some cases they were in fact eliminated when the government was not entirely happy to have the advice it was getting from such bodies as the Economic Council of Canada, the Science Council of Canada and numerous others that we have debated in this House at length.

As I said, I do want to pay tribute to the round table for some of the excellent work that has been done. It has played a co-ordinating role with respect to the provincial round tables to ensure the bringing together across Canada of environmental, business and labour organizations and numerous interests in Canadian society, to address this all-encompassing and urgent issue of sustainable development. This work of the round table has been extremely valuable and has laid a good foundation for its future work.

It has produced some excellent reports and is in the process of producing more. The report that was done on the road to Brazil concerning the earth summit and Canada's role with respect to the earth summit was significant in the contribution that private organizations, government and parliamentarians were able to make at the earth summit.

I note as well its significant work on greening agriculture and keeping an eye on trade developments as they affect the environment and our objectives of sustainable development. There has been ongoing work on trade, the environment and competitiveness and I think one of their more recent reports was on the tax aspects of ecologically sensitive lands.

Globally, it is looking at opportunities for government action to require and impose protection of the environment. At the same time it is looking at those things in the system that can actually punish people who do what we really want them to do.

• (1555)

The role of the round table is fundamental to changes we need to make in how we function as a society and a government. We must ensure we have the resources for a sustainable future so we can enjoy prosperity and