

Government Orders

For example, Canada made serious mistakes by committing to reduce greenhouse gases to an extent far greater than what some of the most directly concerned provinces would have accepted. These are a few things that make us doubt the will of the federal government to respect the provinces. Clause 21.1 of Bill C-83 is evidence of the contrary.

Under the guise of environmental protection objectives, the federal government is encroaching further on provinces' jurisdictions. I would also like to say a few words about the opportunity this bill gives individuals and groups to put pressure through petitions. Allow me to be sceptical about the effectiveness of these petitions, which will be treated the same way they are treated now by the government: they will simply be tabled in the House. Obviously petitions do not change anything and do not influence anybody, including ministers.

As I have said before, lobbyists and ministers go hand in hand and petitions are an exercise in futility. It is ridiculous to claim that the petition tabling process provided for in Bill C-93 will be a formidable weapon for the protection of the environment. The minister has not reinvented the wheel with this idea.

To conclude my remarks, I will say this: the commissioner of the environment must not encourage or even support this offhand attitude that characterizes federal interventions as a whole. I would like to read to you an excerpt from a document on the impact of federalism, published by the Quebec government in August 1995, and I quote: "Quebec's effectiveness and its ability to meet its objectives are increasingly hindered by the intransigence shown by the federal government in areas such as environmental assessment, the inconsistency of its interventions in relation to those of Quebec, including the sudden elimination of grant program funding and regulatory duplication in the pulp and paper and mining industries, the derogatory remarks contained in the report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, and the fact that the federal government is forcing the adoption of its strategies in areas that should largely be under provincial jurisdiction, such as toxic substances, pollution prevention and sustainable development".

The role of the commissioner of the environment is not to promote duplication. On the contrary, he should encourage the various levels of government to respect each other's areas of jurisdiction. By giving so explicitly to the commissioner of the environment the mandate to monitor the extent to which sustainable development objectives are met, members of the committee have unduly politicized the role of the commissioner. We hope that, in the medium term, the use he will make of this mandate will have no impact on his credibility and his impartiality.

[English]

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Burnaby, Ref.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak today on Bill C-83, which will amend the Auditor General Act.

• (1535)

Should the bill go on from the House to the other place and be given royal assent, Canada will be the proud owner of a brand new environmental commissioner, so it is said. The commissioner will have all the bells and whistles of a limousine, yet little gas to drive the wheels. The hands of the commissioner will be tied to the auditor general, who will ultimately have the final say on everything the commissioner does.

I want to read a promise from the Liberals' red book on page 64:

Our second task will be to appoint an Environmental Auditor General, reporting directly to Parliament, with powers of investigation similar to the powers of the Auditor General.

I will briefly compare this promise to what is proposed in Bill C-83. The red book promises that the environmental auditor general would report directly to Parliament. Bill C-83 has the commissioner reporting to Parliament through the auditor general under his office, which is hardly what one would call direct.

Reformers believe the environment should be protected. We believe there is a place for critical review of what the government is doing with respect to the protection of the environment. It is our wish that this person be objective and independent as well as critical. It is also our wish that this person fit within fiscal reality.

Some Liberal members may think I am referring to exactly what is in Bill C-83, but I suggest they read the bill more closely.

The commissioner cannot be an independent figure. The commissioner might as well be a clerk of the auditor general. In other words, the commissioner is simply a staff member of the auditor general's office and subject to the larger pressures and priorities of that office.

I reassure members of the House that Reform is not opposed to the internal structure of the bill. We are simply opposed to the fact that money is being spent on a lot of status building trappings for a person whose job is already performed by the auditor general.

During the environment committee's clause by clause consideration of the bill the Reform Party proposed that any reference to the word commissioner be dropped and replaced by the term auditor general. I was not surprised to see that our amendment was voted down. It would be a cardinal sin, would it not, for any government member to vote in favour of an opposition amendment. We know how the petulant Prime Minister likes to punish his members.