

Supply

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to make some comments about environmental assessment. I look forward to the debate on Bill C-78 and hope government members opposite are listening so that we can be assured we will get good assessment procedures in the country, not the environment circus we have now.

Hon. David MacDonald (Rosedale): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate.

It is an important one and one that has looked at the issue for some time. It is important to look at it from the standpoint of how we ended up in this situation.

The situation we find ourselves in today with the Rafferty-Alameda project is largely, I believe, a result of trying to apply retroactively a process that was designed as a planning process. It was attempted to be applied as a planning process but under ambiguous guidelines open, obviously, to a variety of interpretations. This is clearly an unacceptable situation for all concerned. There is no question, and we have seen this repeatedly in all of the polling and reaction of Canadians on every occasion, that Canadians want their environment protected. They need confidence that the government's policies and laws are clear, consistent and predictable. Steps have to be taken to clarify the confusion in which we find ourselves today.

We have already heard eloquent testimony in the House from my colleague and others about the significance of this project and of the commitment there is to maintain the integrity of the environment. We have to take steps to clarify the confusion in which we find ourselves. This government has already taken those steps and, at the same time, is advancing the whole field of environmental assessment world-wide. One must look at the context in which this particular issue is being dealt with. This is not a government that has avoided discussing or dealing with environmental matters. Consistently, through a series of ministers, it has taken the lead.

Environmental assessment as a planning tool has been practised by the Government of Canada since 1974. It has been used to predict the potential environmental effects of proposals requiring a federal government decision. This process was updated in 1977. Perhaps the most important thing for the purpose of this debate was

the reinforcement of that in 1984 when the Environmental Assessment and Review Process guidelines were issued by Order in Council. I will not dwell at length on the timing of that.

Mr. Caccia: Good Liberal initiative.

Mr. MacDonald (Rosedale): It was a Liberal initiative, and I am grateful to my colleague for reminding me of it.

These processes were never adequately implemented because a series of Liberal governments were not clearly aware of or perhaps, if I dare say so, fully committed to environmentally sensitive planning. There was certainly, and my colleague opposite will know, no substantive legislative framework for these guidelines. The process was never more than a cabinet directive until 1984, and not adequately funded by government and not consistently implemented by government departments.

Since 1984, it has been very difficult even for a government such as the one I support, dedicated to environmental values, to fully implement these hastily conceived, ambiguously-worded guidelines introduced as perhaps, one might say, almost as a deathbed repentance in the dying days of that particular government.

In fairness, perhaps the government of that day did believe, as did this government, that the Federal Court guidelines on the Rafferty-Alameda project, the EARP guidelines, were just that, a set of guidelines to be interpreted pragmatically and reasonably. As a consequence, variations in interpretation could be expected and tolerated.

I think it is a little bit much for anyone to believe that the Government of Saskatchewan would have entered into and commenced to the extent that it did, believing that it would ultimately be found to be in contravention of clearly-defined guidelines. That does not sound reasonable.

As a further consequence, it could be expected that given the nature of these guidelines, there will be differences in interpretation, as has happened in the Rafferty case. It was not anticipated, and I would be interested to know if my colleagues opposite would contradict this. It was not anticipated or expected that these differences would be interpreted with the force of law. Even before this became the problem it is today, this government that I support recognized the need to place