

The Address—Mr. Aiken

[English]

Mr. G. H. Aiken (Parry Sound-Muskoka): Mr. Speaker, in opening may I say that the official opposition has made many of the points which it intended to make in this debate. Some of the hon. members on the government side have been saying today that it is time we went on to something else. Perhaps that is a good indication that this debate has been worthwhile. We are prepared, if other parties wish it, to close off this debate tonight so that the government may proceed with its legislative program.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Aiken: However, there are two qualifications; First, we do have members who are ready, anxious and willing to speak and if the debate does proceed we will be putting up speakers until it ends. Second, we do have a lot of points yet to raise against the government's handling of the affairs of the country and its legislative program as outlined. We will take up these items at some later opportunity.

The throne speech debate is one of the few opportunities left to the opposition to raise questions of policy on its own initiative. I want to take some time to discuss what is becoming an obvious failure of this government. I refer to its failure to tell the Canadian people what it is doing and what policies it is following, if indeed it knows itself. Efforts to use the question period have failed to obtain information on the government's policies on many matters, most particularly the government's policy on foreign affairs, whether it be NATO, Czechoslovakia or Biafra. The Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Sharp) have managed to bluff their way through the question period whenever these matters have been raised. They have brought down on their heads a good deal of criticism for failure to outline what lies behind the day to day decisions which the government is making. Nowhere is this lack of policy more evident than in the matter of a clear science policy for this country.

Last year the government withdrew financial support for HARP. Within recent weeks there has been the cancellation of the Queen Elizabeth observatory project on which four and a half million dollars had been spent. Over the weekend, and not in this house but by way of a press release, the government announced the ending of the intense neutron generator project which had been undertaken

and was in an experimental stage for some time. We have not heard exactly how much money has been spent in the initial stages but we know it has been substantial. Now, Mr. Speaker, when mistakes are made or when projects are found to be unnecessary it is easy to understand that they should be abandoned. But in this particular instance we have not had any indication of what lies behind the decision to withdraw from the intense neutron generator project. It is very easy for us to say that the reason was financial, and this is the only one which the government has put forward, but this decision has caused uncertainty, confusion and a climate of pessimism in the scientific community of Canada.

• (5:50 p.m.)

The decisions in all these cases I have mentioned were made without any explanation except that other matters have a higher priority. Furthermore, these decisions were announced without any attempt to relate them to an over-all science policy for Canada. There was no effort whatever to reassure the country that the government does have a science policy or that its decisions on where to spend or where not to spend the money are made with the best scientific advice available. We have it on the word of the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources (Mr. Greene) that the decision to abandon the ING project was made because of its relationship on the priority scale to the very many other demands on the national treasury, and the necessity the government faced to curtail expenditures." This does not say anything. It is about time the house and the country were told frankly by the government what these so-called priorities are. If we are to have cancellations on the basis of some scale of priorities, let us know what these higher priorities are so that the house and the country shall be in a position to judge the effectiveness of the government's decisions and the validity of the government's judgment.

In addition, the minister must make a statement immediately to reassure Canadians generally, and the scientific community in particular, that the Science Council of Canada and the science secretariat have not been shunted into a back seat in their relationship to the apparatus of government. The minister will have seen the comment of a senior research scientist on the decision to cancel ING. Here again, I quote:

Regardless of all this new policy-making machinery, it seems to be clear that decisions are being made by the Treasury Board as they always were.