

Canada Oil and Gas Act

Mr. Albert Cooper (Peace River): Mr. Speaker, I have taken a keen interest in this bill, Bill C-48. We spent a fair amount of time on it in the committee. All members of this House worked on it there. We have done a number of things because I think we feel it is an important bill.

I have a particular interest in the energy field because my riding depends on the energy industry to a large extent and has an interest in it. In fact, roughly 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the jobs in my riding are created directly by the energy industry. If we think about it in real terms, that means roughly one job in five. In addition to that, of course, capital is generated for the community and for the constituency. There are dramatic spin-off effects in my riding.

Bill C-48 applies to what we call Canada lands, which I have always known as the Northwest Territories and the Arctic. My interest goes back a long time, mainly because the town in which I grew up, the town of Grimshaw, was called Mile Zero of the Mackenzie Highway. For years the Mackenzie Highway was the only route into the Northwest Territories, and as a result of that, any goods, food, equipment, produce or anything which had to go up into the northern communities, had to go up through my community. I grew up with a sense of the north, a sense of its importance, a sense of its potential, and a sense of the opportunities which are in that area.

I feel that Bill C-48 is a very important bill. As I have said in other talks I have given on this bill, I think it is literally the beginning of the future of the north. It is literally the foundation of what will happen in that part of the country. One thing I feel is absolutely essential is that we recognize that anything this bill does must deal with long-term opportunities for the north.

This week I have had an opportunity to reflect on just what "long term" means. My wife's grandmother is visiting us in Ottawa this week, and she is a little over 90. I will not give her exact age because I might get into deep trouble, but there are some real implications when we think about what she has seen in those approximately 90 years. She has seen the development of the car from nothing more than a bit of steam and wood and nothing very sophisticated to what we have today. She has seen the total development of the airplane industry, to the point where we now have jumbo jets flying around the world. She has seen many things happen in those 90 years. She has seen us advance from having no airplanes to seeing a man walk on the moon. For that reason, this bill is really important because we are talking about the future of the lands up in that part of the country. We are talking about beginnings, and this bill is a foundation or a jumping off point for development in that part of the country. The question right away is, what will happen in the next 90 years in that part of the country? I feel very strongly that Bill C-48 is an important bill. It has to be dealt with very carefully. It should be given very careful consideration.

Tonight I would like to focus on the motion which deals primarily with what we call ministerial discretion. I am very concerned about ministerial discretion because I think there are some dangers and some possible abuses of power involved.

I believe one of the dangers is centralization of power. I think it can be very serious if we concentrate power into just a few hands or in just a few people.

● (2120)

The second danger in ministerial discretion as it affects this bill is the fact that it involves government from afar. Westerners are familiar with that kind of experience, familiar with some of the frustrations that can bring about. The ministerial discretion in Bill C-48 may result in effectively developing an atmosphere whereby a government from afar can exist. We have the territories which are many miles away from this House of Commons. If decisions are made here by one minister or a small group, a very strong case can be made for the development of government from afar.

The other danger is that you end up with decisions made behind closed doors. Those decisions automatically become suspect because they cannot be questioned. No one knows what has gone into them. When they are made behind closed doors, there is always a question, always a concern.

The fourth point ties in all of my previous points. Ministerial control is concentrated in a small area. If we look at the ministerial discretion in this bill, we find that the minister has tremendous power. I want to illustrate that by dealing briefly with one part of the ministerial discretion.

Under this bill, the minister has the power to tell the producer, the oil company that happens to be involved, whether to produce or not, how much to produce, where to ship what is produced, when to ship and who to ship it to. It even goes so far as to say at what price the product will be shipped. That is quite frightening. That literally covers the whole aspect of the development of oil and gas in our Canada lands in the north.

This was discussed with the minister in committee. I and other members questioned him on it. We asked the reasons for it and the importance of it. His response basically was, "Trust me." Why should we trust him? Aside from the personalities involved, and I do not want to get into that, we must recognize that we may well be talking about 90 years, a long time. This is just the beginning. We must recognize that this is the foundation or footing for the long-term prospect.

Even though this minister may not abuse the power, he will not always be the minister of this department, not always the minister responsible for this legislation which will have such a dramatic effect on the north.

An hon. Member: Thank heavens for that.

Mr. Cooper: My colleague says, "Thank heavens for that". We as Members of Parliament with responsibility for this bill must make decisions that protect us for the future. Legislation must look to the long term, and we must recognize possible abuses and dangers in the long-term development.

No one would argue whether discretion is necessary. I do not argue that. What I argue is the level, scope and possibilities of discretion, especially when that discretion has very few boundaries, checks and balances. There is a fine line between