

*Government Orders*

One convincing example of the federal government's duplication involves the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, which came in effect last January. Environmental assessment had been, until then, essentially a matter of provincial jurisdiction, had it not? The federal government's unilateral action turned the rules of the game completely around. We in Quebec have been doing environmental assessments for more than 15 years. We have developed an expertise and have established a reputation. With its legislation, the federal government wrecked everything. Worse yet, the federal government did not incorporate any of the amendments proposed by Quebec or any of the other provinces.

The repercussions of this affront to Quebec and the other provinces on the CCME, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, were significant. While the federal minister was inviting her provincial counterparts to discuss harmonization, the events of January 1995 cooled things off considerably.

According to some sources, the climate between the minister and her counterparts remains unsettled. The federal minister would appear to be acting in a somewhat cavalier fashion by showing little concern for the provinces or for the environment. But what do you expect, Mr. Speaker, the minister is much more a political creature than an environmentalist. She is also much more of a federalist at all cost, a vehement centralist, than a decentralist.

Her partisan instincts lead her to unacceptable behaviour that raises a lot of concerns about the environment. She will certainly not effectively manage the environment by treading on the backs of the provinces—quite the contrary. The provinces, and Quebec in particular, have a considerable lead in this area. The minister should respect this and stop meddling in areas of jurisdiction already occupied, and well occupied at that, by the provinces.

• (1255)

If the new Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development looks carefully at the federal government's intrusion into areas of provincial jurisdiction, I am sure that he will focus on how overlap and duplication is detrimental to sound management of the environment.

To get back to this bill, the minister proposes to amend the role of the auditor general by giving him the specific mandate to look into matters related to the environment and sustainable development. As I said earlier and as he himself pointed out during hearings, the auditor general has already opened the door by setting aside \$4.5 million a year for this purpose.

The bill provides for the appointment by the auditor general of a senior officer to be called the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, who will perform this specific task.

One of the commissioner's duties will be to submit an annual report to the House of Commons on behalf of the auditor general. This report will deal mainly with two things: first, the extent to which departments have met the objectives and implemented their plans concerning the environment and sustainable development; and second, a record of the petitions received and their status.

What is new in this bill is that it requires the new commissioner to do two things: one, to ensure that category I departments table a sustainable development strategy within two years after this bill comes into force; two, to open a door by allowing citizens wishing to be heard to file petitions calling for action on the environment and sustainable development.

These two initiatives seem worthwhile in principle. In reality, however, one may wonder how much actual impact they will have.

Let us have a closer look at this new opportunity for people to file petitions with the commissioner.

This is a very simple procedure. The petition must be filed within the specified deadline; certified copies must be sent to those directly concerned; finally, the department responsible must provide a response. The procedure will be implemented without problems.

What I question though is the effectiveness of such petitions. Is this bill merely and stupidly putting in place a mechanism by which petitions can be tabled or will it really enable the people to have an say and to effect change?

In light of what is achieved through the petitions we table in this House, allow me to doubt their ability to effect any changes. The government's will to respond by taking swift action is seriously lacking. Petitions are given only trivial answers, based on facts, statistics or results and in no way sway the government or compel it to do anything. Petitions are not taken seriously by the government.

What will become of petitions to the commissioner of the environment? They will have the same fate as the rest of the petitions tabled in this place, since they will be answered by the same departments. There is no doubt that the government should be forced to pay greater attention to this means of applying pressure that the taxpayers have. Greater merit should be recognized to petitions.

I can remember the petition I tabled in this House regarding the *Irving Whale*. On September 23, 1994, petitioners from the Magdalen Islands asked that leaks be stopped and that further public, and particularly more transparent, hearings be held on this issue. To no avail. The barge continued to leak and is still leaking as we speak, but no further hearings were held.