

Environment

Quite frankly, we are getting to the point where if a community in this country, or indeed in all of North America, boasts that it is the most rapidly growing community, it is like someone saying he has the fastest growing cancer in town. The ravages of growth are all around us.

The proposal in my motion is to couch the problems that we face as a nation, as a part of North America and as part of the civilized and now urbanized world. Appropriate policies must be designed not only to improve the existing environment but to ensure that we do not forget there may be an alternative. That alternative may well come through a form of co-operation that has not existed here before.

Mr. W. Kenneth Robinson (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the hon. member for Grenville-Carleton (Mr. Baker) on the remarks he has made today and, in particular, for paying tribute to a former colleague who first spoke on this motion in 1974. The motion was also presented by our former colleague in 1976. He was very persistent. It is now again before the government.

I wish to point out to the hon. member that there have been some significant results because of this coming before the House of Commons in that the Environment Contaminants Act was passed in 1975 or 1976. Much has been done and much more will be done. However, it is timely that this matter is again before the House of Commons.

I thank the hon. member, not for the practicality of the suggestion, because I do not think it is either practical or necessary, but because the motion demonstrates a real concern for our environment.

I do not think it is necessary to restate this government's concern for a clean, healthy environment. Rather, the record of the government speaks for itself. This is our best evidence. The measures the government has adopted, particularly since the establishment of the Department of Fisheries and the Environment, have been strong, positive measures designed to yield tangible results. I am pleased to say that we are beginning to see those results.

One of the best examples perhaps, only because it has been such an obvious pollutant, is sulphur dioxide. As a result of guidelines established by the Department of Fisheries and the Environment and the cooperation of the industries concerned, we are beginning to see a reduction in sulphur dioxide levels in the air. The same is true of particulates. All told, there have been guidelines established now for emission into the air of five significant pollutants and further guidelines for the discharge of five others into our rivers, lakes and streams.

Polychlorinated Biphenyls or PCBs, which are especially persistent in the environment, are being phased out of use and fluorocarbons are being carefully studied to determine their real effect. Progress through research is also being made on the problem of the long range transport of air pollutants. This is a particularly insidious problem that enables air pollutants from one source to have a detrimental effect hundreds or even thousands of miles away.

I mention these achievements, not simply to oppose the motion, but to demonstrate that concern for the environment is being translated into action. At the same time, however, I believe there there is one element in the motion that deserves some discussion.

The motion before us is praiseworthy in that it looks at the environment in a comprehensive way as a web of interdependent, complex, relationships. This government, largely through the Departments of the Environment, National Health and Welfare, and Urban Affairs, has been looking at the environment in the same way for many years. One of the humbling aspects of this approach, really the only approach, is the realization that we do not know all we should about the environment and the delicate relationships that comprise it.

One example that springs to mind is that of the Canadian chemical industry. That industry is now undergoing exceptional growth that we all welcome. At the same time, however, we know that such growth must inevitably mean the planned introduction of thousands of new chemicals into industrial processes. Needless to say, our scientists cannot even hope to be able to keep up with the monitoring of these chemicals in the environment, either locally or on a wider scale. Unfortunately, I suppose progress dictates that this scenario is repeated time after time as our society expands and develops.

Clearly, neither this government nor any other would simply say that development must stop. Still the problem remains and, to my mind, there are only two solutions to it; research, and the establishment of mechanisms to prevent the introduction of potentially harmful substances into the environment, not after the fact but before.

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We have already heard about the research programs now being conducted in the Departments of National Health and Welfare, and Urban Affairs. The Department of the Environment, as the lead department in environmental matters, also has extensive research programs aimed at discovering the kind of basic information and data asked for in the motion before us today. These are long-term, comprehensive research programs that have produced a great deal of knowledge in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

Additionally, the department has an excellent relationship with many faculties of environmental studies in universities across the country. There, more valuable research is being carried out and, I might mention, a great deal of it funded by the Department of Fisheries and the Environment.

Before I leave the question of research, however, I should like to emphasize that the investigations conducted both by and for the department are not carried out in a vacuum. Because I believe this is the primary intention of the motion, I can assure you there is a very real and useful exchange of information both between government departments and between those departments and the academic community.

Essentially then what is being asked for in the motion is already being done, and because this is so I can see little value