

Heavy Water Production

Mr. Hellyer: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege. I think my hon. friend was not listening quite as closely as he indicated. I did not say that in making the decision to reconstruct the plant the government had blundered. I did say, and this is the point, that we do not know whether or not the government had made a mistake. The Pearson government made a mistake in making the decision on a political basis in the first place. But, I do not know whether the present decision is right or wrong, since this government is hiding the facts on which the decision was based.

Mr. Penner: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for correcting the inference on my part that there was a charge of blundering. I believe the word was used, and the implication was there. The hon. member says he did not mean that, and I withdraw my remarks on that point. I had the feeling though, as the hon. member spoke that he really did not care if he received these reports, that his motion for the production of these papers was simply a device, a spring board to give him another chance to discuss general economic policy.

I must say I was amazed that the hon. member would wish to downgrade in such strong terms the making of political decisions. Is the hon. member suggesting to this House that in his long and distinguished career as a parliamentarian and member of government he did not make political decisions? I was under the impression that members of parliament were elected by their constituents to come to Ottawa to help to make political decisions. Now, we are told that political decisions are wrong and that we should leave most decisions to the experts.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Penner: Apparently, if we leave everything to the experts, Canada will be a happier and better country in which to live. I suggest that the hon. member should look at some decisions experts have made in this country as well as internationally. Not long ago, when I was at the United Nations in New York, I heard of certain decisions that had been made by experts in the field of agriculture. To put in bluntly, those decisions were nothing but boners. So, experts sometimes make terribly bad decisions, and their decisions are not always in the best interests of the people.

The hon. member talked about Canadian National Railways and suggested that there is often some political pressure exerted which prevents that company from taking certain actions. I hope there is such pressure, and wish there were more of it. Let me cite an example from my riding. On the advice of experts, Canadian National decided that they would "run through" the community of Nakina. Here, "run through" means that the company would not bother changing crews in that community. The people of that community got together and formed a citizen's action committee which put political pressure on their representatives, on the government and on others. The result of that political pressure was a political decision. The run through was prevented.

What happened subsequently? The experts took another look at long hauls on railroads and found two interesting things. First, they discovered that long hauls are not safe.

We know that there is an increasing number of accidents on the railroads. Perhaps some accidents are taking place because men are spending too long on the job and getting tired. Safety and alertness are diminished by long hauls. Second, the experts found that long hauls are not economical. So here is a case in which, if the advice of experts had been followed, a thoroughly bad decision would have been made.

May I return to the notice of motion, Mr. Speaker, concerning the production of papers having to do with the decision of the government to assume responsibility for the reconstruction and operation of the heavy water plant at Glace Bay. It was announced in this House on January 29, 1971 by the then minister of Energy, Mines and Resources that the government had authorized Atomic Energy of Canada Limited to enter into an agreement with Deuterium of Canada Limited and the government of Nova Scotia to enable Atomic Energy of Canada Limited to do an assessment which would determine the feasibility and probable cost of bringing the heavy water plant at Glace Bay into production. By now, the plant ought to be producing between 1,700 and 1,800 tons of heavy water which is desperately needed to alleviate the present shortage, a shortage that is not expected to be met until some time in 1974.

The province of Nova Scotia had indicated to the federal government that it was not practicable, because of a lack of sufficient technical expertise at the provincial level, for Nova Scotia to bring the plant into production and operate it with provincial facilities and resources. The government of Canada, therefore, authorized the AECL study, while making clear that it did not include any commitment on the part of the federal government or AECL to carry out further work, to put the plant into production or to operate the same. This study, however, would be submitted to the government for its consideration upon completion.

Atomic Energy of Canada Limited then engaged Canatom Mon-Max, an engineering consortium consisting of Canatom Limited of Montreal and Mon-Max Limited of Calgary, to do a detailed engineering study of the Glace Bay plant and prepare a reconstruction cost estimate. The Canatom study was delivered to AECL on 31 May, 1971, and formed part of a subsequent submission by AECL to the federal government that concluded that, given certain conditions, heavy water could be produced sooner and more cheaply from a rebuilt Glace Bay plant than from a new plant of equivalent capacity.

In early October, 1971 it was announced that AECL had been authorized to commence negotiation with the province of Nova Scotia and Deuterium of Canada Limited, to determine whether a basis could be found for an agreement whereby, with the concurrence of the federal government, AECL would assume responsibility for the reconstruction and operation of the heavy water plant at Glace Bay.

Then, on October 29, 1971, the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) announced in Halifax that a proposal had been negotiated which envisaged AECL acquiring a leasehold interest in the plant and assuming full responsibility for its reconstruction and eventual operation. The job was expected to take about three years and cost \$95 million.