

Government Orders

The committee did a tremendous amount of work on this, as the parliamentary secretary has already indicated. In his remarks he referred to Canada now being only the second country in the world to install a commissioner of the environment. He pointed out that New Zealand was the first country to have a commissioner.

• (1340)

The point I wish to address my question to is the concept of sustainable development being more than words. The New Zealand model for a commissioner is much different from the model being put forward in Bill C-83. Helen Hughes, the commissioner of the environment for New Zealand, appeared before the parliamentary committee and said at the time that she would find it very difficult to operate without being able to look at government policy. The commissioner of the environment in New Zealand has the ability to look at government policy, has the ability to look ahead.

Bill C-83 simply gives the commissioner of the environment within the auditor general's department the ability to look at what government has done and tell us whether we have made a mistake, not to tell us where we have to go and how to get there, not to look at the future, the seven generations the member spoke about.

I wonder if the minister could tell us how he can talk about New Zealand as a model to look up to and then indicate his support for Bill C-83, which does not come close to the New Zealand model.

Mr. Lincoln: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the question and also for the very significant contribution he made to our committee when we studied this question. All of us on the committee were truly grateful for his presence and his contribution.

I concede that we did not go as far as our report suggested. Sometimes politics is the art of the feasible. However, I think it is a significant start toward the New Zealand model.

The commissioner will have the task of ensuring that every ministry of the government will have to table before the House within two years strategies for sustainable development. Strategies for sustainable development as such obviously will touch on policy and programs because sustainable development is effectively how we integrate the economy to the environment within a framework.

As the Minister of the Environment stated, environment will not be carried just by the Minister of the Environment in the traditional sense; every ministry will become a sustainable development ministry. Furthermore, by law it will have to produce to Parliament within two years a strategy of sustainable development.

This is looking forward and not backward. Obviously the strategies will look to the future. If at the time the strategies are tabled in Parliament Canadians or parliamentarians are not satisfied, the commissioner will be subject to petitions on every aspect of these strategies. He will have the power to report once a year to Parliament on the status of these strategies, which will have to be updated every three years through Parliament.

Therefore, I do believe it is a significant step forward. It may not go as far as the New Zealand model, considering that New Zealand is a country of three million people and we are a country 10 times larger and far more complex. At the same time, I am convinced that it is a significant step forward.

[Translation]

Hon. Charles Caccia (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I also have a question for the parliamentary secretary.

As he heard earlier, the hon. member for Laurentides spoke at length about an assumption of hers. She stated that the federal government is using the environment as a means of concentrating power in a big way in its own hands. I would like that the parliamentary secretary tell us what he thinks about the point made by the hon. member for Laurentides.

• (1345)

Mr. Lincoln: Mr. Speaker, I will be brief. As an environmentalist of many years, as someone who has spent most of his political life standing up for the environment, I must say that wherever I go in Canada, whether it be in British Columbia, in Newfoundland or especially in Quebec where I laboured for most of my political career, including three years as Minister of the Environment, whenever I talk to environmentalists or environmental groups, I realize that they do not make any distinction between the federal government and the provincial government, when the environment is at stake.

All they want is for things to work out. All they want is a collective approach where everyone can work together.

I know there has been duplication and overlap at times. It is unavoidable in a government system like ours. But at the same time, given all the positive work that has been done for the environment these last few years, and the very fact that the Council of Ministers of Environment has become a worthwhile body which meets regularly, I think it would be a total exaggeration to say that the federal government is using the environment to infringe upon provincial areas of jurisdiction. In fact, I think we should put this issue aside and find ways to turn the environment into a major cause that could rally all of us, because for the sake of the environment, we must all work together. Otherwise, we are doomed to failure.