

Policy Statement on National Resources

Mr. MacEachen: No, Mr. Speaker, I would not go that far. The point I was trying to make was that at the present time we think it would be better to proceed along the lines I have described than to undertake amendments to the Criminal Code. The hon. member for Burnaby-Coquitlam suggested the calling of a federal-provincial conference to deal with the matter of air pollution in particular because the subject matter of water pollution and water control has already been before the council of resource ministers. At present there is a great deal of exchange of views between the officers of my department and officers in the provincial governments dealing with air pollution. Work in this field might be stepped up. It may be that the next step is the calling of a technical conference of federal and provincial officers on the question of air pollution, and perhaps at that time it would be desirable to convene the type of conference which my hon. friend suggests, after some very difficult and, as I understand it, technical questions are explored.

I have attempted in these comments to underline the seriousness of this problem as we see it, to try to put it in some perspective and to outline the items that we in the department presently have under urgent consideration and which might form the basis of action by the parliament of Canada to institute a national clean air act with a view not only to protecting the health of the Canadian population but also to maintaining the amenities of urban and rural life in Canada.

Mr. Noble: Mr. Speaker, before the minister completes his statement, may I ask him to tell us whether the government has done anything by way of research to explore what has been done in the heavily industrial areas of Europe such as the Ruhr valley? The inhabitants of that area have been putting up with pollution for a much longer time than we have here and surely they must have taken some action to cope with the situation. I wonder whether their experience has been looked into by the government.

Mr. MacEachen: The officers in the department are constantly examining the experience in all countries of the world as a basis for action in Canada. For example, not only have we examined the experience in Europe but also that in the United States, not only with respect to industrial pollution but also with respect to pollution from motor vehicles and so on. Their experience is not always a clear guide as to what we should be doing here.

[Mr. Douglas.]

Mr. Wahn: With reference to the C.B.C. television program on air pollution which was shown last week end, could I ask the minister whether his department would not have jurisdiction under the existing legislation to take samples of the smoke from the plant which was portrayed in that program to determine whether in fact it is, as suggested, emitting poison in the form of fluorine which is affecting adversely the health of Canadian citizens and of livestock and destroying vegetation?

Mr. MacEachen: The emission from a plant of the kind that apparently was portrayed on television is a well known cause of pollution. It affects the vegetation which is eaten by animals and thus a chain reaction sets in. As I understand it, this particular situation is covered by the Ontario clean air act. The Department of National Health and Welfare is prepared to assist in this situation and to provide any advice or technical assistance at our disposal, but we believe that before we step into this situation we should receive a request from the government of Ontario. If a request is made we will be happy to co-operate.

Mr. Lewis: Mr. Speaker, obviously the steps which the minister outlined are necessary preliminary steps and if followed in a difficult situation they would be helpful. Therefore I should like to ask the minister whether he and his department have set some deadline or some target date by which some national standards will be set, subject to improvement in later months or years, or is this investigation to go on for a very long time? It seems to me that the problem, which as the minister said is world wide, is one that becomes worse daily and therefore a start on the setting of standards and their enforcement should be made fairly soon. I therefore ask the minister whether he and his department have set a target date by which time they will start setting standards.

Mr. MacEachen: At present I think we have a pretty clear idea of what we have in mind to cover this situation, and we propose to press ahead with appropriate recommendations to the government for its consideration which would then be dealt with by parliament. We have not set a deadline but we intend to move on it as quickly as we possibly can.

Hon. W. G. Dinsdale (Brandon-Souris): Mr. Speaker, the amendment before the house, as has been indicated by several speakers, is a