

*Government Orders*

would like to take this opportunity to thank them for the contribution they made.

What we have before us today is the result of some four years of labour, going back to when the bill in the form of C-78 was initially commenced and the consultations which literally took place from coast to coast began. I think it is the result of an immense amount of labour and I am very pleased with what we have accomplished. I am very pleased with the degree of unanimity we have been able to bring to the issue at hand in this House. As we have just demonstrated, there was a division of opinion on certain amendments. I think we have made very significant progress in terms of trying to draft a bill that will have widespread support throughout this House and the country as well.

I see before us today in Bill C-13 a beginning and not an end. We have already passed amendments which provide that the minister will report back to the House on his assessment after some five years of its operation.

I am certain this will be an area of ongoing legislative activity. I believe I am speaking today at the beginning of a process that will obviously be a continuing one and will presumably go on for generations and generations.

This process we have put in place is a significant one and will have an impact on virtually every Canadian whose life and environment might be altered for better or for worse by any development project. It will give them the opportunity and the forum in which to voice their concerns with respect to such development.

In my opinion the bill will bring increased efficiency, more consistency and more cost effectiveness to the way we evaluate the environmental consequences of economic development. It will make environmental factors equal partners—and I think that is worth stressing—with social and economic concerns in the process.

Before I explain the provisions of this act I would just like to take a moment or so to talk about the terms of the historical context under which this legislation has evolved. The history of the Canadian environmental assessment process is relatively short. Just 19 years ago in 1973 environmental assessments of federal projects were formalized by a fairly loosely worded cabinet

decision. This decision was followed and reinforced by several cabinet directives during the 1970s.

A regime under which we study the environmental effects of proposed projects today was established in 1984. The Environmental Assessment Review Process guidelines order in council or EARP, as we know it, was written as a guideline. Several court decisions however have given what was meant to be a guideline, the force of administrative law. As a result this guideline became the law of general application.

A further result of these court decisions was to breed uncertainty in the environmental assessment review process itself. As we all know, uncertainty can cause credibility to decay. For an environmental assessment process to be effective it must not only be credible, it must also be seen to be credible.

For all these reasons and indeed for more, we welcomed the Supreme Court decision on the Oldman River project. It has brought much needed clarification of federal jurisdiction over the environment. By recognizing the constitutional right and responsibility of the federal government to conduct environmental assessments when it makes decisions, this ruling has removed much of the uncertainty previously associated with such reviews.

This high court also recognized that the responsibility for the environment is shared between the federal and provincial levels of government. Its decision will help to clarify the respective role of each. The Oldman ruling will ultimately have the effect of encouraging a co-operative approach among the jurisdictions involved in environmental assessments. This is an approach which has been embraced wholeheartedly in the legislation before us. You will find there is room for increased co-operation and participation in the environmental assessment process. Indeed that is one of the key underpinnings of the act before us.

I must tell the House at this point that even before these court decisions, the federal government recognized the inadequacies of EARP, as we knew it, and had begun to take steps to reform it. The genesis of this reform was in 1987 when the then Minister of the Environment released the discussion paper entitled "Reforming the Environmental Assessment".