

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, May 22, 1984

The House met at 11 a.m.

● (1105)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION ACT

MEASURE TO AMEND

The House resumed from Monday, May 14, consideration of the motion of Mr. Ouellet (for Mr. Gray) that Bill C-24, an Act to amend the Financial Administration Act in relation to Crown corporations and to amend other Acts in consequence thereof, be now read a second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Miscellaneous Estimates; and on the amendment of Mr. Crosbie (p. 3688).

Mr. Dave Nickerson (Western Arctic): Mr. Speaker, if I recall correctly, I have already had approximately two minutes to deal with the motion of the Hon. Member for St. John's West (Mr. Crosbie).

The House of Commons finds itself in something of a predicament today. The House has already voiced its opinion on the closure motion which was introduced by the Government, and debate has been curtailed on the matter. Today the Bill is to be given second reading and referred to the appropriate committee. However, the motion which we are presently debating is that the Bill be not now read a second time but that that occur some six months hence. What happens this afternoon when the vote is taken? There is a possibility that the motion introduced by the Hon. Member for St. John's West might be carried. Where will that put us if the House expresses its opinion in two conflicting ways? I would imagine, however, that that is unlikely to occur because the Government will undoubtedly use its majority to rush this matter through and to foist it on the Canadian public.

It is evident that the Bill is flawed. Members on this side have spoken at considerable length and have demonstrated the areas in which the Bill is flawed. For example, it does not prevent the proliferation of Crown corporations. In fact, if anything, it makes it easier for the Government to establish yet more Crown corporations.

● (1110)

There will be a time limit imposed on parliamentary debate when new Crown corporations are brought into being, unlike the debate on Petro-Canada and Canagrex, which went on for

a considerable length of time because these were matters of great public importance. By and large, the public of Canada was of a contrary opinion to that of the Government and did not really want these things to happen. The Opposition was then able to do its job and debate these issues in earnest and at length. This will now no longer be possible. There will be a short time limit for debate on further Crown corporations, and that is, Sir, only if the Government does not want to go the Order in Council route, which it can do under this new legislation, or if it wants to create a new Crown corporation as a subsidiary of an existing one.

The legislation does not deal completely with the question of accountability. Most of the parliamentary review of the operation of Crown corporations will be, to all intents and purposes, after the fact. Although the Government is obliged to present to parliamentary committees its plans for the future, I would imagine that those plans would not be detailed and the Government would still engage in the same jiggery-pokery with Crown corporations as it did in the past. If it so wishes, it could instruct Crown corporations to do certain things—for example, Petro-Canada to take over Petrofina—and it can do that at the drop of a hat without bringing those plans before Parliament in advance for public scrutiny.

There is no real parliamentary surveillance of the operations or the plans of Crown corporations. There is no parliamentary surveillance which makes any kind of reasonable sense. Therefore, it is my intention to vote this evening in favour of the motion introduced by the Hon. Member for St. John's West which, if carried, would enable us to devote a further six months to the study of this important subject. It would give us time to go back to the public and to seek further expert input.

In all likelihood, in six months time we will have a new government if the election has been held by that time. In all likelihood it will be a Progressive Conservative Government, and our stand on Crown corporations has been made fully known. It was the Conservative Government under the leadership of the Right Hon. Member for Yellowhead (Mr. Clark) which introduced in the first place in 1979 a much more comprehensive Bill to deal fully with the Crown corporation problem. Even if an election has not been held by that time, and even if the Liberal Party as an interim measure still forms the Government of the day, it would likely be a different Government with perhaps a slightly different outlook from that which it has today. Therefore, in all likelihood, even with that possibility, the legislation which it might wish to bring forward dealing with Crown corporations would be superior to that with which we are faced today.

The problem with the present Government is that it cannot really open the doors and let the sunshine in. Its closet, Sir, is