

Oral Questions

[English]

ENERGY**BEAUFORT SEA—EXPLORATION DRILLING BY DOME
PETROLEUM**

Mr. Peter Ittinuar (Nunatsiaq): Mr. Speaker, my question is to my friend, the informative Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. My question concerns the decision by on-site and regional engineers to suspend drilling by Dome Petroleum in the Beaufort Sea due to the environmental risk of heavy ice build-up. This decision was overturned by Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development officials in Ottawa, thereby undermining the authority of the local engineers.

● (1140)

Can the minister tell the House on what basis the decision of local authorities was reversed, and did a telegram from Dome Petroleum to departmental officials in Ottawa have any influence on this decision?

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, I share the hon. member's concern in terms of protection of the environment in Canada's north.

Under the Oil and Gas Production and Conservation Act, a field officer can suspend operations on the drill sites in the Beaufort. That communication is then passed on to the regional engineer in Yellowknife. Due to the build-up of six-inch ice in the drill area, it was recommended by the field officers that operations be suspended.

I should indicate to the hon. member and to the House that at the time of the order, drilling was not taking place. In fact, they were production-testing and the area was completely encased. The order went to Ottawa. After discussion, not only—as the hon. member has indicated—with Dome but also with the regional officer in Yellowknife, the order was modified in order that the production-testing be completed. We need approximately two days, or a maximum of five days—that is the window we need—and then the well would be suspended for the winter period.

Mr. Ittinuar: My supplementary is for the Prime Minister of Canada. Does his Minister of the Environment, who is not here today, unfortunately, stand by his earlier stated concern over our lack of preparedness in case of a major oil spill in the Arctic, and was his department consulted by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development about this latest decision concerning drilling in the Arctic; and what are this minister's concerns?

Mr. Epp: Mr. Speaker, I will attempt to answer the question fully. I have spoken with my officials today, and I am not satisfied with the communication which took place in terms of the incident to which the hon. member has referred and with the fact that there was a lack of communication between the Ottawa office and the various departments and our field officers

[Mr. Clark.]

This morning I have given instructions that the communication system be examined and improved in order to avoid the indecision and also the apparent conflict which has taken place.

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UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE**OVERPAYMENT OF BENEFITS—STEPS TO PREVENT
CONTINUANCE**

Mr. John Thomson (Calgary South): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Employment and Immigration. The 1978-79 annual report of the commission indicates that in addition to \$71 million of unemployment insurance overpayments found by the commission, the Auditor General found \$290 million.

Can the minister indicate to the people of Canada what he is doing to ensure that these unprecedented overpayments are halted immediately?

Hon. Ron Atkey (Minister of Employment and Immigration): The overpayments in question, as reported by the Auditor General, were overpayments in the calendar year 1978 and, of course, are of great concern to me and to this government.

I should say that the new Government of Canada has taken three specific steps to deal with this very serious problem. The first step is to constitute a new record of employment which will ensure greater accuracy in the filing of information by employers in Canada. The second is to institute a report of hiring procedure on a pilot project basis to ensure that there will not be continuing instances of abuse by some employees who collect unemployment insurance at the same time as they acquire new work. The third thing that this new government has done is to establish an on-line computer system which will be operational in Ontario and the west by the summer, and in the Atlantic provinces by next fall. This will ensure greater accuracy in the compilation of data and will ultimately lead to a rather sizeable reduction in the rather large overpayments which now exist.

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[Translation]

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS**EFFECT ON CANADIAN ECONOMY OF POSSIBLE MOVE OF
EMBASSY IN MIDDLE EAST**

Hon. Jean-Luc Pepin (Ottawa-Carleton): Mr. Speaker, so that the Prime Minister may catch his breath, I shall ask my question of the Secretary of State for External Affairs. On Wednesday, some of my Liberal colleagues echoed in the House the concern of businessmen who export to Arab countries about the situation resulting from the proposed transfer of the Canadian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. I must say that certain Progressive Conservative politicians have also