

*Energy*

The original bill provided for a ministerial discretion to exempt certain domestic production from the levy. This again is an atrocious provision. The House of Commons is being asked to authorize the minister, without any recourse to legislative authority, to exempt certain production from this extra levy. If the minister wants to make Petro-Canada look good, or some other company, he could easily exempt such company from this extra charge. That kind of discretionary authority should never be given by parliament to any minister.

In addition, this measure gives the minister the discretion, without recourse to parliament, to deem any production in Canada as imports for the purpose of compensation. The intent clearly is to allow Syncrude products to be deemed to be imports for the purpose of compensation, but there is nothing in the measure that restricts the minister's intention to Syncrude production.

The minister's intent is, as he indicated to the committee, to allow for subsidization to world prices of future heavy oil production, including the expansion to the Great Canadian Oil Sands plant, the proposed new Shell plant, the Petrofina plant, and possibly some heavy oil production from the Lloydminster and Cold Lake fields. We can understand that and we may agree with it, depending on the circumstances that prevail on those particular occasions. However, it is absolutely atrocious for the minister or this government to ask the House of Commons to give the minister the authority to deem certain productions as imports for the purpose of compensation, at his discretion and at any time he wants.

There is nothing to prevent the minister from declaring all Petro-Canada's production as imports for the purpose of compensation, or doing other things like that to ensure Petro-Canada a decent balance sheet, or one a lot more decent than the one produced last year.

There is another clause, the impact of which is not so important, which contains a ministerial discretion. This is a discretion that anyone who believes in the parliamentary democracy system, which is supposed to exist in this country, must find offensive. During committee meetings we had discussions about these various ministerial discretions, I may say to the government's credit. It did redefine the clause providing for the levy on certain domestic products. It was provided that the funds from that levy would be used for satisfying the conditions of this bill—meaning that it would not be another tax that could be used for anything. It would be a tax specific to this particular bill. That was an improvement, and I congratulate the government on at least going that far.

● (1552)

There was considerable discussion, Mr. Speaker, on the question of ministerial discretion in regard to deeming any domestic products as imports for the purposes of compensation. In our suggested amendment, we moved at committee that such action taken by the governor in council or by the minister should be subject to an affirmative resolution of the House of Commons. That is, in reference to the fact that we are supposed to be a democracy, there would be the provision

for the House of Commons to validate a recommendation by the minister to deem certain products imports for the purposes of compensation. At least this would say that the people's representatives were deciding where these tax funds were to be sent. It is a very modest and reasonable request.

It seems that the minister, the minister's advisers, the Privy Council bureaucrats, or whoever controls these matters, would not consider or tolerate such a move, and we were faced in committee with either being rather tenacious, and thereby causing some delay in the progress of this bill through committee, or backing off and conceding to the government this very undemocratic clause in the bill.

I must say it is times like these that one's conscience and principles as a member of parliament are sorely tested. However, after much discussion, there was one little motion in regard to that clause, namely, that orders in council granted pursuant to that particular clause—which is clause 2 of the bill—shall stand permanently referred to the standing committee which normally considers oil and gas matters. That is not as satisfactory as having parliamentary control over the spending of public funds, but at least it potentially allows some public airing of these matters through a committee which is knowledgeable in the area. It does allow us some discussion and, therefore, any step that a minister may take that is out of line would have the potential of being exposed to the light of day. It is at least a minor political check. I say political, Mr. Speaker, because there is no guarantee that reference to a committee allows for such discussion. In this particular committee during the discussion of this bill and during all of the meetings, not once was I, as the spokesman for my party, asked whether I would be available at the time the meetings were scheduled. Not once during all of that time was I asked, Mr. Speaker. It is common decency in the operation of this House and of the committee system to check with the members opposite who have special interests or responsibilities in an area, to find out whether they are going to be present or do not have conflicts regarding the scheduling of meetings. As I indicated, not once, not a solitary time did the minister, the chairman of the committee, the parliamentary secretary to the minister, or anybody on that side, ask whether I would attend the committee meetings on the dates scheduled. As it so happened, there were a couple of committee meetings I was not able to attend.

As a consequence of my non-attendance, the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources (Mr. Gillespie), on that campaign junket of the cabinet to western Canada, made a speech in Lloydminster accusing us of filibustering the bill and of not being there to participate in meaningful committee sessions. Well, Mr. Speaker, the minister's words do not cast a very long shadow, if you like, and no one pays much attention to them in western Canada, so I am not really concerned about the impact of that speech.

What I am concerned about is the morality of that kind of behaviour and then pointing an accusing finger when, in fact, it was the performance of that side of the House that precluded me from being at those particular committee meetings.