

Adjournment Debate

but, Sir, it reflects nothing less than an act of criminality and neglect when the government fails to act.

● (2150)

If it is true that the government has the absolute right to govern, it also follows that members of the opposition have the absolute right of scrutiny, the absolute right to ask questions and to suggest alternatives.

With reference to the Garrison Diversion project I and many of my colleagues, including the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre (Mr. McKenzie), the hon. member for Provencher (Mr. Epp), the hon. member for Brandon-Souris (Mr. Dinsdale), the hon. member for Churchill (Mr. Smith), the hon. member for Portage (Mr. Masniuk), and other colleagues from the NDP, have made suggestions to the government regarding how it should approach the U.S. in this matter. We have not only resorted to suggestions and requests, but we have begged. I myself have stood in the Chamber and have begged and pleaded that the government do what it is supposed to do, that is, to act primarily to protect the interests of Manitobans.

We have not suggested nor have we pleaded for irresponsible action by the government. Even before I was a member of the House my colleagues from Manitoba were suggesting that the government ask the U.S. government for a moratorium on construction, for the matter to be referred to the International Joint Commission to let them arbitrate it and, once they brought in their recommendations, only then should the construction proceed. That is reasonable and normal. Only two and one half years ago we were asking for that, but the government was silent.

Then at the eleventh hour there was a crisis reaction from the government. After years of pleading, the government decided last October to write to the United States government on the eve of a change in administration, on the eve of a presidential election in the U.S. At that time this government asked the President of the United States if he would consider a moratorium on construction. It did so when the project was 40 per cent completed and when the devastating results were there for everyone to see.

Proving everything I say to be true, the IJC report, which was tabled no more than a month ago, bears out our worst fears with regard to the Garrison Diversion project. The report states that the implications on the waterflow are far greater than was anticipated. Now this afternoon in this Chamber I rose to my feet, and in the absence of the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and of the Secretary of State for External Affairs I put my question to the Minister of State without Portfolio (Mr. Guay), from Manitoba. I asked him whether during the visit that the Prime Minister will make to Washington he will discuss the critical Garrison Diversion project with the U.S. authorities. The minister answered that he does not know and that he will look into the matter. He said the government has been vitally concerned with this matter for years. That is the problem with this government. Its members say they are concerned. They had the mandate to act, but they did nothing.

[Mr. Whiteway.]

I say to you, Sir, that if this government and if the Minister of State without Portfolio do not request the Prime Minister of this country to raise the matter with President Carter as a matter of priority and urgency, the minister will have no other choice than to resign, and the government of Canada, which was elected with a mandate to act, will have reneged and forfeited its right to govern. If they cannot govern and they do not know how to step aside, we are ready and able to take over.

● (2200)

[Translation]

Mr. Fernand E. Leblanc (Parliamentary Secretary to Secretary of State for External Affairs): Mr. Speaker, first of all I think it is important to point out that the minister without portfolio from Manitoba, the hon. member for St. Boniface (Mr. Guay), has gone very deep into this issue and made many representations to his colleagues, particularly to the Secretary of State for External Affairs. The government as well has been very concerned about protecting Canada and Manitoba particularly. I hope to be able to answer in a precise and appropriate way in the short time I have to go into this issue. This point was raised for the first time by the hon. member on December 15, and on that occasion the Secretary of State for External Affairs told him that it was impossible to answer such a question during the question period. The question raised by the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Whiteway) on December 15 was as follows:

Why did the government of Canada agree to the extension of the IJC report on the Garrison diversion without asking for a guarantee of a moratorium on construction?

In a letter dated October 12, 1976, the government of Canada asked the government of the United States to postpone all the work and decisions concerning the construction of the Lonetree reservoir until the report from the commission had been received and subsequent consultations between the two governments had been held. In my opinion, this constitutes a request for a moratorium on construction, such as the hon. member requested.

In a letter dated August 5, 1976, the International Joint Commission explained that the delay in the publication of its report was due to the fact that the Garrison Diversion Study Office had not yet completed the report that it was to submit to the commission. The office was unable to meet its August target date mainly because it had to provide an in-depth and knowledgeable evaluation of available data concerning water quality and also guarantee their reliability. These data from the basis for the forecast concerning the eventual effects of the project on the quality of the Souris and Red Rivers in Canada. The governments of Canada and the United States have obviously understood the need for the commission to have at its disposal accurate data concerning water quality to help in the preparation of its final report.

They have also recognized the validity of the other main explanation given by the commission, that is that the population of both countries must be given enough time to study the report of the Garrison Diversion Study Office before holding