

Northern Canada Power Commission Act

apart from whatever mechanisms may exist and apply as a result of existing federal laws or regulations.

The Northern Canada Power Commission is not a tiny agency without powers: it is, in fact, an agency which has substantial powers and could make decisions which could have serious and harmful effects upon matters of interest to the House and, indeed, to the country. In my view, it would be possible for the commission, acting on its own, to start another project of the dimensions of the James Bay project. It could become involved in any other kind of project, perhaps of smaller dimensions but nonetheless involving, as all hydro projects do, the possibility of very serious danger to the environment of the area affected. It could become involved in matters relating to the export of power, raising questions of great importance to the whole country and not simply to the select group of people who might sit on the commission. We are dealing here with important matters. The commission would be dealing with important matters. What the minister proposes to do is to allow the commission to deal with matters of great importance to the whole country without having to be responsible or accountable to the whole country through the cabinet, through parliament or through the elected representatives of the two territories concerned.

I want to deal for a moment with the environmental aspects of the power that is being granted to the commission. We all know that whenever major hydro developments are undertaken—and they fall within the ambit of concern of this commission—there is the possibility of environmental damage. This situation may have more severe consequences in northern Canada, the ecology of which is more susceptible to damage than other parts of our country. As is known to members of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development who accepted the invitation of my colleague, the hon. member for Yukon, to visit Whitehorse last year, there is a great deal of controversy about surveying and about areas in which hydro development should or should not proceed. These are important public questions, but the minister is proposing to allow such questions to be decided in private by a commission which is not accountable to the governor in council and, consequently, indirectly through the minister to the House. To me that is a very dangerous principle involving specific harm to an important part of this country, and I, as one member of parliament who has taken the opportunity—as have several of my colleagues on this side of the House—to visit northern Canada and listen to the concerns of people who live there, feel it is not a capacity we would like to see built into a commission without a great deal of care and deliberation.

● (1540)

I am not sure why the minister wants to attack the principle of accountability. I am not sure why he wants to destroy the present requirement in the law that the commission must be accountable to himself and to his colleagues in a formal, legal way. I do not know why he wants to establish, in this commission, a capacity to do things which might have an effect upon longer range public policy and which might have an important effect on the future of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories, in effect, without accountability. It is a very dangerous principle, and I hope that when the minister comments on the

[Mr. Clark (Rocky Mountain).]

very sensible amendment of my hon. colleague from Yukon he will tell us why he wants to do away with accountability to the governor in council and, consequently, to this parliament, and why he wants to establish this agency with an extraordinary capacity to affect the future of the north.

I assume that the minister will try to answer these questions and justify his insistence upon doing away with the accountability of the Northern Canada Power Commission when he speaks in response to the amendment proposed by the hon. member for Yukon. I simply want to make the point that the onus is very clearly on the government to prove its case, because it is the government which is changing the existing situation. The existing situation has a requirement of accountability. This party is not trying to initiate a major change; it is the government which is initiating a major change—and we want to stop that particular change because it is dangerous to the principle of accountability to parliament. More particularly, it is very dangerous to the future development of the northern territories and its people.

Hon. Judd Buchanan (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, this amendment and comparable ones have been discussed in previous incarnations of this bill, as well as on this one, on several occasions. I find it rather interesting that hon. members opposite, who usually make great protestations and express great concern about government bureaucracy, government red tape and redundancy, should urge that the government maintain what is basically a redundant feature in the legislation. We feel strongly that this feature is redundant because the governor in council approves all projects. The funds for the projects are included in the main or supplementary estimates, and therefore they are approved by this House. In addition, all individual contracts are submitted to and must be approved by Treasury Board in accordance with the Financial Administration Act.

Therefore, we feel that this is a redundant piece of legislation which unnecessarily complicates the situation, and that the question of accountability which was raised so vigorously by the hon. member for Rocky Mountain (Mr. Clark), is covered. It is covered by the fact that the funds which go to the Northern Canada Power Commission must go through the normal procedures of this House, and then the individual projects are subjected to the scrutiny, and must receive the approval, of Treasury Board, as I indicated, under the terms of the Financial Administration Act. So, basically, we feel that this matter is properly covered as it now exists, and that this deletion is simply in respect of a provision which is no longer necessary.

Mr. Wally Firth (Northwest Territories): Mr. Speaker, I, too, would like to make a few comments regarding the amendment put forward by the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) and reiterate a point I made some weeks ago. I was somewhat surprised to hear the comments of the hon. member for Rocky Mountain (Mr. Clark). He also knows that the people in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories are asking for more autonomy and that they would like to be able to make more decisions about matters which concern them. To put a restriction like this on a