

Government Orders

Minister of the Environment is unlike what one would expect from this bill. It is very marginal.

The Minister of the Environment is not the main actor under the terms of the bill under discussion. To answer the hon. member's question, cabinet could be exempted. The process would not even require an exemption because the process is designed in such a manner that under very rare circumstances could the Minister of the Environment put his or her foot down and say no to a project. There is impotence here in the implementation of environmental principles.

That should take care of overriding in their own legislation because it would not be necessary to override. To use a common expression, you could drive a truck through this bill as it is designed.

What safeguards are in the opening portion of the bill, in the preamble? There is good rhetoric but in essence the operative sections of the legislation are written in such a manner that to talk about environmental safeguards, we must go outside the bill itself. The weakness of the bill is that the political responsibility to be discharged by the Minister of the Environment is marginalized by the design of the bill which attributes so much power to the initiating department, which could be the Minister of Transport, the Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources, the Minister of Finance or the minister of any other important agency which operates at the federal level.

I hope that this gives a sketchy answer to the question of the hon. member. We were surprised, as I pointed out in my intervention earlier, that the bill itself was criticized by virtually every witness. There was not one sector in society affected by this bill that persistently came forward and said they liked it. Usually, from our experience, there is a polarization before committee. One sector of society says it is good and another one says it is bad. In this case, we had a uniformly negative response from virtually all witnesses, except one or two.

Mr. Francis G. LeBlanc (Cape Breton Highlands—Canso): Mr. Speaker, I would like to compliment my colleague, the member for Davenport, for giving an extremely succinct and penetrating summary of the weaknesses of Bill C-78. He speaks with authority, as we

all know, from his long experience on environmental matters.

I want to ask the member, and I know we have very little time left for him to reply, not on the substance of Bill C-78 which, as he has outlined is so severely flawed, but about the process. That is, this motion once again undermines the ability of members from all sides of this House to contribute constructively to legislation because the government refuses to take into account the suggestions made as a result of the committee stage of legislation.

We have a great example with these bills, not only Bill C-78 but the others that are before us, of a government which is ignoring the worth-while suggestions that have been made and an opportunity to improve very necessary legislation.

I would like to ask the member if he would just outline for the record the suggestions that have been made to improve Bill C-78 or to improve the whole process of environmental assessment which are in the public domain and which the government could have drawn upon to redraft this very important piece of legislation.

Mr. Caccia: Mr. Speaker, on both points the hon. member is quite correct and I agree with him. The process in committee is being very seriously damaged in its credibility by motion No. 1, which we are debating today. It makes a mockery of all that work and, particularly in the case of Bill C-78, it in essence rejects the input that we received from the public. The public interest is seriously affected by this move on the part of the government.

As for the second question, yes, the government in essence is saying that the input provided by members is not relevant. This is, in part, easy to understand because under this system one does not pay much attention to the opposition.

• (1250)

We know that. We live with that every day. However, when this message is articulated, not in relation to opposition members but to public organizations, to witnesses, to associations from coast to coast which take the trouble to make a submission and then see their