

Private Members' Business

Mr. Geoff Scott (Hamilton—Wentworth): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to participate in debate on this private member's motion initiated by my friend, the hon. member for Ottawa West.

At first blush it is an interesting proposal. The member's motion requests that in the opinion of the House the government should consider the appointment of an environmental auditor general who would conduct an audit of all government operations on a rotational basis to ensure any activity, program or initiative of the government is conducted in a manner that is compatible with a policy of protection and enhancement of the environment.

It is not a bad idea, but let me make it clear that protection and enhancement of the environment are already high priorities of this government. Our record clearly shows our commitment from the passage of the Canadian Environment Protection Act in 1988, to the clean-up of orphaned waste sites, one part of which the Minister of the Environment announced in British Columbia just last week, and the soon to be completed negotiations on an acid rain accord with the United States. While our past actions are bearing fruit, we are now clearly looking to the future with the publication next week of the government's environmental Green Plan for a healthy environment.

Before we rush to create yet another new bureaucracy, we should review what we have in place now to ensure that environmental consideration are fully reflected in the decisions of government. The Government Organization Act of 1979 gives the Minister of the Environment the power to implement the policy of the Government of Canada with respect to the environment.

This act requires the minister to initiate, recommend, undertake and co-ordinate programs and policies to promote the establishment or adoption of objectives and standards relating to the environmental quality, or to control pollution; and to ensure that new federal projects are reviewed and assessed for their environmental impacts. That is a pretty wide-ranging mandate.

The Minister of the Environment is also required to provide the heads of departments, boards and agencies with advice on environmental issues and may, with the approval of cabinet, establish guidelines for federal departments, agencies and Crown corporations with respect to activities that have a potential impact on the environment.

In addition to the legislated base, the Prime Minister has clearly committed this government to consider the environment as a priority in all of its policy and program decision-making. The Prime Minister has played a key role in making Canada a world leader in promoting environmental concerns by, for example, ensuring a prominent place for the environment on the agenda of the annual meeting of the G-7 countries.

This government's commitment to the environment is also enshrined in legislation. Bill C-78, an act to establish a federal environment assessment process, affirms in its preamble a commitment to, and I ask the hon. member to listen carefully, "achieve an appropriate balance between economic development and the preservation and enhancement of environmental quality".

Bill C-78, the Canadian environment assessment bill will ensure that all federal departments and agencies conduct environmental assessments of all project proposals, for which they have a decision-making authority and gives the Minister of the Environment substantial powers to ensure that this process is fair, efficient, transparent and allows for a high level of public input into decisions of projects which have a potentially significant impact on the natural environment.

As a government we realize that the activities of government touch Canadians in many ways which are not directly linked to projects. That is why it is government policy to require that an environmental statement accompany any proposal considered by cabinet dealing with policies or programs which may have a significant effect on the Canadian environment.

Together, Bill C-78 and the policies of the Government of Canada will ensure that virtually every significant action considered by government will be reviewed for its environmental implications and that Canadians will have the right to either participate directly in the process or to have access to the results.

In addition to Bill C-78 and the policies of the government, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of the Environment has the responsibility to administer the Canadian Environment Protection Act. This act gives the minister substantial power to establish regulations protecting Canada's air, water and land. More than this, the act creates for the minister the obligation to report to Canadians at regular intervals on the state of the Canadian environment. The next state of the environment report will be published early next year.