

Government Orders

tion to be brought in by the new government the new minister will budge on this one and ensure that policies and programs are covered under the process.

The decision maker discretion should be minimized and accountability should be ensured. In the environmental assessment process and in building confidence among the public we cannot be seen as having a strong environmental assessment process on the one hand and then later an unaccountable decision making process which can ignore the whole exercise that has gone on before it.

New Democrat amendments in the previous Parliament to Bill C-13 went quite far to improve this and remove the tremendous amount of discretion in the previous bill where the minister or responsible authorities were only bound to act when they were "of the opinion that damage to the environment might occur". That discretion for the most part has now been removed and assessment or action must be taken if a project or undertaking may cause significant negative environmental effects.

This now has to be tested in court, but it goes a long way to closing a loophole under the guidelines which was used in the bridge project assessment and open to industry to influence politicians.

Proponents should justify the purpose and the need of the project. Alternatives should be considered as part of the assessment process. What was never considered in this process was improvement to the existing ferry system. There is an alternative view to what could be taking place here: an injection of funds and a maintenance of existing jobs. The assessment process that existed on this particular project did not take those into account. A new environmental assessment bill should ensure that we deal with this sort of thing.

I also believe very strongly there should be a significant public role early and often throughout the process, including participant funding and notice. I will admit and agree there has been a lot of debate on Prince Edward Island about the Northumberland Strait and the bridge, and perhaps even the tunnel the member for Malpeque earlier indicated he originally supported. There is no question at all that the whole matter of public debate over projects like this one is very important. The key thing in all this is that the debate has hinged on economic issues, not on environmental issues.

• (1810)

We have been forced to gloss over the environmental issues in the particular debate and not to make our decisions on environmental issues but on economic ones because the government and the proponents have constantly said: "Don't worry about the environmental things. Our studies indicate that environmental matters are not important".

Yet the one federal panel that looked at it in general terms said: "Turn it down. Don't accept it. Do something else". Many of the questions raised in the House today were of an environmental nature. They have still not been answered to the satisfaction of the people most concerned about it. A full and public debate is important but it has to include all issues surrounding the project.

I feel very strongly about the environmental assessment process and what it means for Canada. I also feel very strongly about the lack of an environmental assessment process on the Northumberland link project. I feel very unhappy the government has chosen not to move quickly on a new environmental assessment process. It would have avoided a lot of problems in dealing with the issue before us today.

Madam Speaker, I thank you very much for your time and attention today. I certainly wish all members well in their deliberations on this amendment.

Hon. Audrey McLaughlin (Yukon): Madam Speaker, my colleague has raised a number of very pertinent questions on this issue. He has pointed out that the new Liberal government has chosen simply to follow the policies of the previous Conservative government. I guess many Canadians will be asking: "What's new?"

He raised a very good point with regard to the environment. Much of the debate in Prince Edward Island on the fixed link was linked to environmental issues. I know my colleague has been very involved in studying these issues. Is it not now time, as part of the environmental process he described, to look at a new form of what is often called green accounting? In other words should we not look at projects in a way that takes into account other factors than cost, funding and financing? What about the effects on health, the effects on the environment and other ancillary effects of any project undertaken that can result in additional costs to the public, if not well thought through?

What does my colleague think of the idea of a new form of accounting around major projects like this one? Does he support that idea?

Mr. Taylor: Madam Speaker, I appreciate very much the question from the member for Yukon who has supported me in many of my efforts on environmental issues and for whom I know the environment is very important. Her comments about a green economy are not only important but most timely. I am very glad she raised them and I am very happy to have the opportunity to discuss them for a moment in the Chamber.

For all too long we have talked about sustainable development with the focus on the word development and not enough focus on sustainability of what it is that we are doing. There is nothing more important in any government decision making than the concept of sustainability. If we are spending money on any project whatsoever, the long-term accountability of the project