

*Sunset Laws*

proposal to protect the right of those ill-equipped to protect their own? I do not see any in the legislation, Mr. Speaker.

We could have a situation where a pressure group, campaigning for its own, narrow self-interest, could force the continuation—or the cancellation, depending on the circumstances—of a program that does not have broad support within the community. The results could be detrimental to a large number of Canadians.

As well, Mr. Speaker, the review process is tailor-made for reliving battles won or lost in earlier legislative skirmishes. This possibility becomes particularly likely in periods of minority government where individuals or parties could resurrect issues long resolved. Think of some of the legislation that has been passed in this House in recent years, legislation that was long fought and took up many weeks of the time of the House. I am sure some members on the opposite side are proud because they forced reforms and amendments in order finally to have their support or not have them further delay it. When you imagine that under this proposed legislation everything would have to come up for review at a regular time, how completely damaging it would be to the process and how frustrating to the public and to us in trying to carry out our job.

● (1650)

In this respect, what concerns me most is that it is much easier to terminate a program than to start one. It's much easier to delay a project than to speed it on its way. You can readily see, Mr. Speaker, how the procedures proposed in this legislation could lead to endless political haggling and a very unproductive government organization.

One might ask why would it be unproductive? During the entire period that its future is in jeopardy, an organization's effectiveness would be impaired. Projects or activities couldn't be undertaken because there would be no assurance that they could be completed. Good staff, faced with the prospect of unemployment should the organization be dissolved, would tend to seek alternative employment, creating both a staffing and a morale problem. Constant uncertainty would influence every decision and every undertaking.

The whole review process would also create major and serious problems for hon. members themselves, because to avoid criticism of bias or discrimination all programs would have to be treated in an equal manner.

Each decision to continue or to terminate a program is extremely important; this means, then, that every program would require an exhaustive and painstaking review by hon. members. The immediate effect would be a tremendous addition to the parliamentary workload. Members who already are pressed to meet their diverse responsibilities as elected representatives would suddenly find themselves with a whole new onerous workload. And the responsibility to participate actively in each review could not easily be sloughed off. Each decision would be simply too important.

The proposal would force us to bring back a number of issues which were extremely controversial and, when they

[Mr. Fleming.]

resurfaced, all of us would have to consider seriously participating in the discussions surrounding those reviews in order to protect ourselves in the light of the stands we took earlier with regard to the legislation originally.

There is no question that parliament's workload would rise dramatically and could easily reach the point at which the legislative process would be impeded by the review of organizations whose mandate had expired. The cumulative effect of this process is obvious: the greater the workload, the more superficial the review. Meanwhile the pressure upon us to act responsibly while making such reviews would increase, as would the impact of lobby forces, some of them, perhaps, with a selfish interest with regard to a piece of legislation not broadly understood or of broad appeal, giving them the ability to cause great damage to the intentions of parliament when it earlier passed the legislation.

That, Mr. Speaker, is no reflection on any member of the House but, rather, it is a hard and real fact of life. This factor alone seriously undermines the intended effectiveness of this legislation and is sufficient grounds for me to oppose the bill now before us.

There is another feature of this legislation that is worrisome. It is one that became extremely obvious to me during the expenditure reduction exercise undertaken by this government last summer. You will recall, of course, Mr. Speaker, that many projects and programs were designated for reduction or elimination as a result of the government's need to cut spending.

What was the reaction of Canadians? As I recall, virtually everyone heartily endorsed the principle of reduced government spending. We should have lower taxes. There should be fewer public servants. Of course there should be lower spending. Of course the bureaucracy had become too large. Of course we must be more efficient, there should be fewer public servants. That was the reaction. Then the details became available, and what a hue and cry went up across this land! Everybody was riding his hobby horse. Those who are dedicated and important supporters of the arts campaigned to cut some other program rather than the ones which directly affected them. Those in one affected industry were prepared to sacrifice another in their place, and so on.

The point of this, Mr. Speaker, is that it is virtually impossible to obtain a consensus among Canadians on what the federal government should be doing for them. It is because it is impossible to obtain such a consensus that the House of Commons has such an important function to perform. That is the reality, that is why we are here. After the government has put forward its proposals we, as backbenchers on this side must decide whether we can support it, whether we ought to press for changes in caucus if we believe there ought to be adjustment, or if our constituents press for change and, in turn, the opposition, with their particular interests or in accordance with their party philosophy, can press for change.

A program or policy that lacks visible appeal is doomed at the outset under this bill before its long-term ramifications can even be considered. I am afraid that too often we, as Canadi-